



*The Crisis-Image: Rites of Passage in American Independent Cinema (Coppola, Jarmusch and Van Sant 1994-2004).*

*Anna Rebecca Rogers*

*Doctor of Philosophy*

*The University of Edinburgh*

*School of Literature, Languages and Culture.*

*2011.*

*Declaration.*

I hereby declare that this thesis is the result of my own research and that I composed it myself. Reference to the work of other scholars is explicitly stated within the text.

Anna Rebecca Rogers.



*This thesis is dedicated in loving memory to my uncle Noel Rogers, my grandfather Lennart Backman and, above all, to my beautiful, soulful mother Eva Christina Backman Rogers.*

### Acknowledgments.

I would like to thank some very special people in the following order:

Professors Martine Beugnet and Jean Duffy who have been the most amazing, patient and encouraging supervisors I could have wished for.

Professor Yvonne Tasker and, in particular, Dr Kriss Ravetto for making my viva examination such a surprisingly pleasant experience and providing me with new angles and ideas for the thesis and its development.

My wonderful colleagues Christina Bruns, Ana Salzberg and Pasquale Iannone for the stimulating conversation, for being cinematic companions and, above all, fantastic friends.

My lovely mother-in-law Margaret for all of her advice and help with formatting the thesis and turning it into a PDF document for me.

All of the librarians at the National Library of Scotland (my favourite place in Edinburgh).

The two men in my life: my father Nigel and my husband Patrick (you're the boss, PMD) for helping me to get through all of this...particularly when *the black-eyed dog* came to visit me. This thesis would not have seen the light of day if weren't for you.

Finally and most importantly, my mum...words cannot get close. I will miss you and love you every single day for the rest of my life. Thank you for supporting me in all the ways you did while I was writing this, even when you had your own vicious battle to fight... thank you for every little thing you gave to me...*thank you for the start of my heart.*

## Contents.

**Introduction:** Pages 1 – 22

**Chapter One:** Adolescence. *The Virgin Suicides* and *Elephant*. Pages 23 - 66

**Chapter Two:** Death. *Dead Man* and *Last Days*. Pages 67 - 122

**Chapter Three:** Life-Crisis: *Lost in Translation* and *Broken Flowers*. Pages 123 - 166

**Conclusion:** Pages 167 - 171

**Bibliography:** Pages 172 - 180

## Introduction.

The abiding and predominant tendency of scholarly and critical approaches to American Independent Cinema is to characterise it as a cinema in crisis. In his seminal study of the American cinema of the late 1960s and early 1970s entitled *'A Cinema of Loneliness'*, Robert Kolker (1988: 6) states that: '(t)hat small group of filmmakers who emerged... and were able to take brief advantage of the transitional state of the studios, using their talents in critical, self-conscious ways, examining the assumptions and forms of commercial narrative cinema, had a difficult task. They were without community or security. The corporate community that rapidly re-formed around them limited and compromised their small efforts... "studio interference" has merely changed its complexion and complexity.' Kolker's view remains representative of the issues at the heart of debate over 'independent' cinema. Recent studies, such as those of Gregg Merritt (1999) to John Berra (2009), focus on the very definition of, and by extension the possibility of, 'independence' in a commercially driven business where economic factors, more often than not, take precedence over the romantic notion of artistic 'vision' and 'integrity'. Other scholars such as Geoff King (2005, 2008) and Jason Wood (2004) employ the nebulous term 'indiewood' in order to recognise the hybrid nature of 'independence' within the American film industry; indeed, it is quite clear from any account of the growth of this industry that 'independence' is, at best, a highly relative term: aside from iconoclastic or avant-garde work, most filmmakers must navigate the area between commerciality and artistry.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Michael Z. Newman (2009) in his article *'Indie Culture: In Pursuit of the Authentic Autonomous Alternative'* argues that 'indie' cinema has become as commercially viable a product as mainstream cinema in that it caters to and plays to the tastes of a certain elitist audience who, in turn, invest in this 'alternative' culture by purchasing certain products. Indeed, Newman also argues that marketing companies have co-opted a number of formal strategies from 'indie' cinema in order to appeal to this niche audience when selling their products. For Newman, 'independence' designates a term that is already tied up with certain financial motivations from the outset. Newman's argument makes the concept of 'art for art's sake' seem somewhat naïve. The commitment of the directors discussed in this thesis to using film as the primarily visual medium that it is, rather than as a mere vehicle for an entertaining narrative, allies them more closely with European 'art house' filmmakers who have become synonymous with 'independent' filmmaking and a kind of cinema that has not always reaped financial benefits. However, it is quite clear that there always has been and continues to be a market for 'alternative' cinema, but the financial context of 'independent' filmmaking is now so complex that the view that 'independence' equates with unknown filmmakers working on 'shoestring' budgets is, at best, outdated and inaccurate.

This scholarship is valid and clearly has its place; however, my intention in writing this thesis is to analyse a corpus of American Independent films as a cinema *of* crisis, rather than one *in* crisis. In his article, *'The Art Cinema as Mode of Film Practice'* (which was originally written in 1987), David Bordwell identifies some of the key characteristics of an 'alternative' cinema (lack of a cause-effect structure in narrative terms, psychological reaction rather than action and, above all, opacity) which he believes are being integrated into, or re-fashioned for, American film. He notes that: '(i)f Hollywood is adopting traits of the art cinema, that process must be seen as not simple copying but complex transformation.' (Bordwell 2008: 157) This thesis follows on from Bordwell's analysis to examine specifically the ways in which recent American Independent cinema (as the alternative to the classical 'mainstream' style) appropriates and re-interprets the co-ordinates and tropes of 'art' cinema in terms of both form and content. Broadly speaking, Hollywood cinema, in its classical mode, is 'action' cinema *par excellence*: it follows a neat trajectory from crisis to resolution through the action of the main character and the space that this character creates around him/herself. This kind of cinema is also, definitively, a narrative cinema in which everything is organised logically in order to direct the viewer's attention towards specific details. As a mode of story-telling that passes its technique off as 'invisible', it rarely, if ever, draws attention towards its construction as the result of multiple choices (see Ray 1985). Close viewing of many American Independent films would suggest that, by way of contrast, this kind of cinema is one of action and narration in crisis. This is not to say that Independent cinema is not 'narrative' cinema (indeed, the films discussed in this thesis are all structured around a loose narrative), but it is the difficulty of relating this 'narrative' that takes precedence over the cause and effect structure common to most classical modes of storytelling. Independent cinema gives the viewer worlds of crisis in which it is not merely the main protagonists (some of whom in the corpus to be discussed can best be described as ciphers or placeholders for characters) who are affected by this crisis, but the construction of the narrative itself and, by extension, the cinematic viewer's cognitive reaction in response to what he/she sees. These films travel between the staging of action, or the possibility of acting, and the complete breakdown of this central structure. I would argue, taking my cue from Bordwell, that as a mode of 'art' cinema, American Independent film is not simply the polar opposite of classical cinema (in fact it draws a great deal from this tradition), but is the other face of the same coin. American Independent cinema is, then, not another 'version' of European art house cinema, but a cinema that engages directly with its classical inheritance; what it stages is the impossibility of addressing specific forms of crisis within an established, or culturally accepted, language and the concomitant need to create a different cinematic language. Hence why so many of the narrative



worlds we are confronted with in American Independent cinema are at once familiar and estranging (the recognisable ‘television’ setting of David Lynch’s films being an obvious example). In this thesis, I argue that current trends in American Independent cinema (as seen in the corpus of films I will analyse) suggest both engagement with forms of cultural cliché and established film genres and the simultaneous creation of a new mode of seeing and thinking.

Aside from Bordwell’s seminal essay, scholar Jeffrey Sconce has contributed recently to the assessment of the aesthetics and poetics of American Independent film in his essay *‘Smart Cinema’* (2004) in which he examines in particular the work of directors Quentin Tarantino and Todd Solondz. Sconce acknowledges the increasingly hybrid nature of American Independent cinema and elaborates on some of its more salient features in terms of both form and content. He writes: ‘(n)ot quite “art” films in the sober Bergmanesque art house tradition, nor “Hollywood” films..., nor “independent” films according to the DIY outsider credo, “Smart” film nevertheless share an aura of “intelligence” (or at least ironic distance) that distinguish them from the perceived “dross”...of the mainstream multiplex.’ (in Williams and Hammond 2004:430) This ‘aura of intelligence’ is manifest in a number of stylistic strategies that contribute to the cultivation of a ‘blank’ style at the centre of which is an indictment of the white, middle-class American family (Todd Solondz’s *Happiness* (1998) and Sam Mendes’s (admittedly more mainstream) *American Beauty* (1999) being prime examples of this style). What is interesting about Sconce’s analysis is his refusal to focus on new auteurs in the industry and rather to delineate an emergent style within American Independent cinema; he notes: ‘American Smart cinema should be seen as a shared set of stylistic, narrative and thematic elements deployed in differing configurations by individual films.’ (in Williams and Hammond 2004: 432) Sconce’s approach demonstrates how it is possible to elaborate on and develop an aesthetics of cinema from the point of the industry it comes out of rather than as a result of a highly specific and personal vision. As a theory that is definitively located within and defined by the politics of the moment of its inception, the auteur theory is of limited use when outlining the specificity of contemporary American Independent cinema. Indeed, attempts to critique the use of the term ‘independent’ on the basis of a director’s faithfulness to his/her own vision are not only erroneous, but naïve. Now, more than ever, films produced with the American Independent industry are exemplary of the fact that film is a collaborative art form, while the notion of the ‘auteur’ has become a marketing strategy. Although the films analysed in this thesis have very little in common with Sconce’s notion of ‘Smart’ cinema, his analysis of shared formal and narrative strategies suggests a more fruitful approach to the analysis of Independent cinema. Moreover, as important as Kolker’s book remains as a study of the aesthetics of American

Independent film its construction around 'great' cinematic auteurs limits the scope of its investigation. In this respect, my aim in this thesis is to discuss a chosen corpus of films in terms of its shared themes and formal strategies. I do not intend to deny that the directors of these given films do not possess personal vision, but rather to describe the *kind* of cinema that is emerging out of the American Independent industry currently. This strategy also enables me to align 'newer' voices in the industry such as that of Sofia Coppola with established directors such as Gus Van Sant and Jim Jarmusch.

My aim in this thesis is to examine a corpus of six films as loose representations or investigations of various rites of passage: adolescence, death and life-choice. In order to do this, I will draw upon a synthesis of theoretical texts: primarily the film-philosophy of Gilles Deleuze (1925-1995) (in particular his theory of crisis, cinematic time and thought) and the anthropological writings of Arnold van Gennep (1973-1957) and Victor Turner (1920-1983) on rites of passage. More specifically, I will focus on the concept of liminality as a state in which one is 'betwixt and between' (Turner 1995: 95) categories. Any rite of passage, as we will see, can be separated out into a tripartite structure: separation, liminality and re-integration. The films discussed in this thesis centre on the stage of liminality as one of inherent ambiguity, metamorphosis and transition. More often than not, the passage is not completed so the liminal stage is never resolved. As I will demonstrate in the following chapters, film is the ultimate medium for presenting crisis and liminality because its very essence as an art form is *being as change*. Through close analysis of the six films to be discussed, I will demonstrate that contemporary American Independent cinema has produced some of the prime examples of film as the medium of crisis, liminality, evolution, mutation or *becoming-other*. At this stage, I will outline the corpus of films to be examined in this thesis and then elaborate on the main theoretical framework I will employ in order to draw out the specificity and complexity of this kind of cinema.

Film, as the art form that captures space and time, is ideally suited to exploring themes of crisis, transition and transformation. The varied components that form the body of a film, such as colour, light, texture and sound, alter continually. On film, bodies become protean forms in a world that is itself in a state of flux. Crisis, in the context of this thesis, has a very specific meaning; while the more common meaning of the term as a period of heightened tension and angst is apt, as an anthropological term it also has a more complex meaning that denotes a period of *becoming-other*. Film is able to present this *becoming-other* or process of metamorphosis so well precisely because of its innately fluid qualities. Moreover, film characters are able to incarnate ambiguity and mutability as they are *made* to be stable or unstable through the manner

in which they are filmed. As we know, in a more conventional or traditional film, a substantial part of screen time is devoted to making a character believable through the narrative situation and the attribution of personal characteristics or personal history, so that the film viewer can identify with this character as a believable person in a recognisable setting. If, however, we view cinema as the art form par excellence of 'being' as 'change', the 'protagonist', as a body on screen, is an unstable entity that evolves in space and time. Film characters throw into crisis the idea of the enduring self through their inherent changeability, something that is evident in the films discussed in this thesis. In other words, a cinematic body is already one *in and of crisis*.

In choosing a particular corpus of films made between 1994 and 2004, my purpose is to offer (in terms of an assessment of aesthetics, poetics and cinematic effect) an alternative reading of independent cinema (that is, as an art cinema). By isolating this group of films, my intention is to engage with a body of work that is representative of King's notion of 'indiewood' cinema (2005), but from a formal perspective. These films conform to the 'indiewood' model because they were all funded and distributed by 'major minors' (conglomerate companies such as Miramax and Focus Features that 'buy' into the Independent aesthetic as a viable commodity). As we have seen, in this respect, it makes no sense to talk of an 'artist' or an 'auteur' any longer; American Independent cinema is now, more than ever, the quintessential example of the collaborative art form (both in terms of cinema as business and as creation). By focusing on the corpus of films which will be introduced shortly, one of my aims is to demonstrate that there is a wholly different way of looking at American Independent cinema that does not entail either naive indictment of the impossibility of functioning as an 'artist' within an increasingly hybrid industry or erroneous comparisons to American cinema of the 1970s. In analysing these seemingly disparate films as representations of specific rites of passage, it becomes clear that there is a definite unity in the themes and concerns of newer voices in the industry (Coppola) and established ones (Van Sant and Jarmusch). As I have stated earlier, my intention in proceeding thematically in this study is to stress the importance of the *kind* of cinema that is emerging out of the American Independent industry over 'individual' voices. I do not intend to deny that these three filmmakers possess their own styles, but in juxtaposing them it is possible to produce a definition of American Independent cinema that exceeds the tidy categorisations of studies limited to the notions of 'independence' and 'auteur'. Moreover, in contrast to a critic such as Manohla Dargis who has described contemporary American film as 'the new nihilism...a cinema that encourages our total disinterest toward the world' (in Hammond and Williams 2004: 434), I will demonstrate that in some cases this kind of cinema may even constitute a radical critique of America's most established rites of passage in a manner that does not merely resort to satire or

parody but, in Deleuzian terms, helps to create an alternative way of seeing and thinking: the production of a *thought of the outside* (2005). In this respect, these films are not simply representations of crisis, but also constitute a vital response to crisis within contemporary America.

The films in this thesis are about progression or, more specifically, the difficulty of progression; nominally, this might seem like a study of narrative structure or classical modes of story-telling. However, the concept of a 'plot', where there can be said to be one here, is subservient to the investigation of what it means to progress, to change or mutate within the context of a rite of passage. The narrative frameworks of the films discussed in this thesis are thrown into crisis via visual stasis and a heightened emphasis on the role of the cliché (that is the role various visual strategies play in cementing a narrative together). More often than not, the directors of these films play on the two-dimensional space of the cinematic world in order to create tension between surface and depth: in other words, crisis is often evoked in a desire to break through the 'cliché' or the superficial. In these films, cinema's innate visual, sonic and temporal qualities are privileged over its narrative capacity in this corpus of films. What the viewer sees on screen here are bodies evolving, mutating, dissolving and merging via quasi-ritualistic processes. Furthermore, the bodies in these films are in crisis; they are *becoming other*.

All rites of passage involve trials and ordeals for the ritual subject so that even when the process is successfully completed, it is not achieved easily. Indeed, the difficulty of completing any rite of passage is made apparent both thematically and formally in these films. In the case of the films examined in the first chapter of this thesis (*The Virgin Suicides* and *Elephant*), the adolescent rite of passage malfunctions; the ritual subjects stagnate and remain within the liminal zone so that they are unable to progress fully into adulthood. Bodies are presented as figures on the verge of disintegration or are exposed to a latent harm or threat. Stasis leads to death literally and figuratively so that nothing but the 'surface' of the image remains. This is to say that the cinematic worlds presented in *The Virgin Suicides* and *Elephant* are as hollowed out as the protagonists themselves. The films considered in the second chapter (*Dead Man* and *Last Days*) centre on death or, more specifically, dissolution as a form of *becoming-other*. The central protagonists in these films are dying and involved in a ritualised process that separates them from the living and prepares them to 'pass over'. These films present the viewer with a crisis of the body in which the central 'characters' continually mutate and evolve into something else. In situating death as another stage in a journey, Van Sant and Jarmusch recast life as a ritualised



process of metamorphosis and evolution in which death is not the finality we commonly conceive of it as being. The protagonists in these films *become-other* during a period of protracted liminality in which their personal characteristics are dissolved: each time they cross a threshold, they metamorphose. The third chapter deals with the crisis of choice, or the broadly existential question of how to lead one's life (considered in *Lost In Translation* and *Broken Flowers*). The central protagonists are removed from their everyday routines and forced, through a liminal encounter, to question the paths their lives are taking or have taken. Crisis, in these latter two films, is a matter of being inescapably defined by *the other*, while the world in which these characters live is one held together by clichés in which it is impossible to believe in anything any longer. In Deleuzian terms, these characters are looking for a *line of flight* out of an existence governed by stereotypes, something that can only be achieved through a stubborn belief in this world, its possibilities and the human body. Both Coppola and Jarmusch play visually with stasis and movement to suggest the possibility of escape from a stultifying existence. While in *Lost In Translation*, identity is shown to be a confining principle that precludes the possibility of creation, in *Broken Flowers* the central protagonist's refusal to exist as anything results in a nihilistic passivity that prevents any form of hope or belief in anything. What these two films stage is the necessity of re-instating a belief in *this* world, despite its absurdity because this is the only way genuinely new forms of thought and existence can be created.

The films in this thesis address directly the act of *becoming-other* that any rite of passage brings about, then. As liminal entities, the protagonists in these films are caught up in a process of ritualised metamorphosis that helps old identities to be effaced in preparation for the next stage in life. In particular, these films present three separate cases of transition: that of passing from childhood into adulthood, that of passing from life into death or dissolution/becoming-other and that of finding a new direction or path in life. In each case, *becoming-other* is facilitated through the experience of liminality. In *The Virgin Suicides* and *Elephant*, the protagonists, as adolescents, are inherently transitional or threshold creatures, but these films suggest that this *becoming* is often carefully controlled in a manner that mirrors the brutality of the teenage rite of passage; this is to say that becoming is often prevented and this leads to paralysis of the self and finally, death. More than anything, these latter two films are about the implicit violence of constricting the teenage body through the notion of identity. In this respect, both *The Virgin Suicides* and *Elephant* constitute a subtle indictment of the adolescent rite of passage (in particular in its more traditional form). Coppola in *The Virgin Suicides* hints at the brutalisation implicit in the teenage rite of passage by resolutely focusing on the cliché and the 'surface' of the image. In doing so,



she hints at the dark reality that lies beneath the beautiful imagery: something that erupts into the diegetic setting by the film's conclusion in the form of a swamp and algae infestation and a mise en scene drenched in a sickly green colour. Van Sant also deals with trauma and violence in *Elephant*. The control and order of the school environment is already mirrored in the film's camera work so that an atmosphere of impending harm is created through de-framings, lighting, time looping and a sound track of *musique concrète*. Eventually, the violence (manifest in various forms of control) that remains latent in the first half of the film breaks into the image. However, whereas *Elephant* presents a world where the protagonists are given no options aside from conformity, Coppola does suggest in *The Virgin Suicides* that the male characters may have other possibilities made available to them through denying the traditional roles that lay in wait for them. In *Dead Man* and *Last Days*, the protagonists undergo a ceremonial passing into death or dissolution through immersion, metamorphosis, decomposition and re-growth; as we shall see, this is done through *detritorialisation* and *becoming*. These films have a great deal in common. In both films, the protagonists are ritually removed from the social world and divested of personal attributes. Both characters go through a protracted liminal period in which they *become-other*, and in both cases this ritualised ceremony takes place in a forest (which is an inherently liminal space). Most importantly, death becomes dissolution and is re-cast as an infinite process of disintegration and re-birth that happens through *becoming*. Furthermore, *detritorialisation* and *becoming* also help to undermine generic images that, particularly in the case of the western and *Dead Man*, are so closely allied with particular patterns of thought. Both *Dead Man* and *Last Days* constitute a primarily visual experience for the film viewer, who has to be prepared to engage with the film in a manner not normally required of him/her when watching classical treatments of these topics. In this way, Jarmusch and Van Sant create a kind of cinema that is allied to popular genre films, but they marry the act of seeing to the act of thinking beyond accepted or established ideas. In other words, the film viewer can also experience the effects of *detritorialisation* and *becoming* through watching these films. Although there is not a definitive rite of passage at stake in the film discussed in the final chapter of the thesis, they both take on a loose form that can be likened to the tripartite structure of a rite of passage. In *Lost In Translation* and *Broken Flowers*, the protagonists are separated from their familiar environments and, through the experience of liminality, they are forced to abandon their usual routines and to question the paths they have chosen for themselves. In *Lost In Translation*, the two main protagonists are *detritorialised* in space and time through the experience of being jet-lagged in a foreign city. Although this is initially disorientating and, for the character of Charlotte in particular, disquieting, this de-centring of the self helps to create opportunities to form new and

unforeseeable connections. Coppola (not uncontroversially) turns Tokyo into an exotic backdrop that facilitates the protagonists' liminal encounters. By opening themselves up to the city and to each other, they start to *become* rather than *be*. As we shall see, the change from *being* to *becoming* is evident in Coppola's switch from stationary camera work in the film's first half that suggests enclosure, to a hand-held style that privileges movement, colour and texture over 'plot' in the second half of the film. In *Broken Flowers*, Jarmusch makes deft use of the static camera frame in order to suggest a life of sameness and repetition that is shut off from all possibility of becoming anything else. The central protagonist Don Johnston is not so much a 'character' as a placeholder or cipher used to denote extreme passivity and negativity. The 'road trip' that he more than reluctantly embarks on functions as a catalyst for inserting movement into his world. This latter film is read in conjunction with Deleuze's expansion of Friederich Nietzsche's concepts of passive nihilism and the eternal return. By the conclusion of the film, it is possible to see that *the return of sameness* has been replaced by *the return of difference*. This crucial shift in consciousness enables a fortifying belief in this world, in spite of its absurdity, and all of the possibilities it has to offer.

As I stated earlier, these films present the state of liminality as one of inherent ambiguity and transition: which film is the ultimate medium for communicating. In *The Virgin Suicides*, the liminal state of adolescence is evoked through images that hover between dream and reality, while the use of clichéd images can be linked directly to the coping mechanisms invoked to deal with trauma. In terms of characterisation, it is impossible to capture the Lisbon girls: they are at once 'stereotypical' figures (or the 'dream girls' of their era as Coppola characterises them) and mysterious, liminal creatures that elude all forms of categorisation. By way of example, on screen they are likened to both saintly icons and to ghost-like figures or apparitions. The viewer can recognise them as the quintessential 'all-American girl', but cannot say anything about them beyond this summation. The hollow nature of the images contained within *The Virgin Suicides* can also be directly linked to the crisis of selfhood that the female protagonists suffer: there is no possibility of existence outside of these pre-fabricated roles for them, so the only option that remains open to them is self-annihilation. In *Elephant*, the state of adolescence is shown metaphorically; Van Sant's characters are constantly in transition and they occupy inherently liminal spaces such as corridors and doorways. The cliché is also used here as a way to signal a cinematic world of crisis. The abject violence that concludes the film breaks through the 'surface' layer of the image; this is the 'reality' that has been concealed within these images from the outset of the film. If *Elephant* has any message at all it is as an indictment of the education system that is presented in the film as rife with control, hierarchy and hypocrisy: violence is approbated if it is

part of maintaining a system or institution. The 'horror' of *Elephant* is already clear from the way Van Sant presents his characters as two-dimensional (figuratively and literally) beings that are absorbed into the school system. Anonymity prevails over individuality so that the 'students' seem like tribal subjects, all of whom in the end are subject to the same level of violence. More disconcertingly, the inner world of these protagonists is presented as being as empty as the outer 'cinematic' world. Both *Dead Man* and *Last Days* are genre films; yet Jarmusch and Van Sant deliberately choose to work within these genres in order to subvert or to challenge conventional thought processes. This is achieved initially by drawing attention to the hackneyed nature of generic images, and then by creating purely optical scenarios that break through the cliché and help the viewer to see and think anew. Perhaps more than any of the films in this thesis, *Dead Man* and *Last Days* engage directly with a specific cinematic inheritance as a form of cultural shorthand; the scenarios and settings of these films are readily recognisable worlds within which the viewer's engagement with the image, and by extension his/her coordinates of thought, is disrupted or thrown into crisis. Both of these films demand from the viewer a new form of seeing and thinking as a way of responding to this strategy of 'estrangement' from the familiar. In *Dead Man* and *Last Days*, the questioning of identity is extended to the cinematic language: that is, the ways in which we create and uphold 'truth' or patterns of thought. As we have seen, *Lost In Translation* and *Broken Flowers* centre on the crisis of selfhood, in particular the dilemma of how to define oneself outside of the clichés imposed on one by others and re-discover the existential maxim of self-creation. In both of these films, the diegetic world is described through stereotypical imagery and populated with archetypal figures; indeed, the protagonists are constricted by pre-fabricated images of themselves. The re-awakening of the 'self' (as a form in fluctuation) in *Lost In Translation* is facilitated through the immediacy of corporeal experience that is represented in the film through images that verge on being purely optical. In *Broken Flowers*, the protagonist is finally brought out of his apathetic state by being reminded of the world's opacity, a situation that is shown through images that confound both the protagonist and the viewer. Ultimately, these two films stage the possibility of believing in *this* world and its potentiality rather than any notion of a 'higher' existence and values. What *Lost In Translation* and *Broken Flowers* show is the re-integration of the protagonist within his or her environment materially: through the body, through the senses and through movement. Having introduced my reasoning behind the selection of this corpus of six films, I will now go on to explain some of the more intricate aspects of the chosen theoretical framework.

Social anthropology and Deleuzian theory may seem like incongruous approaches to film studies. Indeed, Deleuze and Guatarri would be critical of the structures and schemas elaborated upon in

Van Gennep and Turner's work. More specifically, Deleuze and Guatarri's concepts of *detrterritorialisation* and *becoming* explore the possibilities of un-doing hegemonic principles, systems, structures and ways of thought. Perhaps the quintessential example of their philosophy is the notion of *the body without organs*: a method of opposing organising and structuring principles in order to allow unforeseen and genuinely new connections to be made. Essentially, the *body without organs* is a creative principle. My aim in creating a theoretical synthesis between these somewhat incompatible theories, is not to deny their differences, but rather to adopt a Deleuzian method of re-appropriation and re-creation. In focusing specifically on the concept of liminality, I do not equate liminality with detrterritorialisation and becoming, but explore the ways in which this state of ambiguity can enable these positive Deleuzian principles to take flight. In fact, as is the case in all of the films explored in this thesis, liminality becomes a protracted state from which it is difficult, if not impossible, to return. As such then, these films are as much investigations of the principles of detrterritorialisation and becoming as they are of crisis and liminality. As we have seen, and as we shall see in the chapters that follow, film, as the art form of being as change, is the primary medium for relating narratives of crisis.

As stated earlier, a number of theoretical texts have helped to shape the framework of this thesis and to establish what the 'crisis-image', in its various facets, is. The core scholarship used in this thesis is the anthropological writings of Arnold Van Gennep on rites of passage, Victor Turner's development of Van Gennep's model in his work on ritual theory, and Gilles Deleuze's theories of movement and time in cinema. More specifically, a synthesis of three studies is used throughout the thesis, Van Gennep's *The Rites of Passage* (1960), Turner's *The Ritual Process* (1995) and, in particular, Deleuze's *Cinema 2: The Time Image* (2005). Additionally, chapters two and three draw upon Deleuze's work with Felix Guatarri on the concepts of *detrterritorialisation* and *becoming* as well as Deleuze's own radical interpretation of the philosophy of Frederick Nietzsche. While theoretical terms used in this thesis, such as rite of passage, crisis and liminality, are taken directly from anthropological sources, Deleuze's theories of cinema are germane as they help to show how concepts, such as 'crisis' and 'liminality', can be represented on film. Even though these theoretical sources are used in tandem throughout the thesis, it will be useful to establish separately the significance of these texts, the key ideas contained within them, and their relevance to the corpus of six films. In addition to the work of these scholars, other sources are used where it is pertinent to do so (for instance Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the chronotope (1981)). In developing links between the theoretical texts used within this thesis, I will focus initially on the anthropological sources as these provide a broad framework within which Deleuzian theory is used more specifically.



In his seminal work of 1908, *Les Rites de passage*, the Belgian anthropologist, Arnold Van Gennep labels the recurrent activities that surround an individual's 'life crises' (1960: vii) as 'rites of passage' (1960: vii).<sup>2</sup> He broadly categorises these life-crises as: 'birth, social puberty, marriage...and death.' (1960: 3). Crisis has a specific meaning within an anthropological context; it designates a turning point within an individual's life when old values and identities are left behind in ready reception for new attributes. Crisis denotes a state of *becoming-other*; the ritual subject goes through a period of instability in which he/she is subjected to various trials and his/her former self is effaced. This intensive period of change that Van Gennep calls liminality helps to prepare the ritual subject for his/her future role in life. Any rite of passage is a tightly controlled process that proceeds through an established pattern that has three parts: separation, liminality and re-integration; within this process, liminality is a period of radical change that is not navigated easily. As Catherine Bell (1997: 37) notes in her analysis of Van Gennep's theory: '(t)hese [social] changes can occur smoothly and meaningfully as part of a larger, embracing, and reassuring pattern only by means of their orchestration as rites of passage.' These rites are invoked as a way of helping both the neophyte, or ritual participant, and the wider community to negotiate collectively a stage that could be potentially disruptive to the social order, and to recognise which stage of the process has been reached.

It is worth taking some time to examine what ritual activity actually is and its purpose within the context of a rite of passage. There is a wealth of scholarship on the purpose and meaning of ritual activity, but it has a very specific function in a rite of passage. Ritual action helps to enforce order within this period by signposting the different stages of this transition for the neophyte and his/her community. Of course, these rituals are not merely a set of rules that need to be obeyed, but are culturally meaningful to the society that enforces them. Ritual is not only a social act that helps to signal a change in status; it helps to *bring about* this change in status. These acts are subscribed to and enforced by the community that has invented them. Catherine Bell (1997) notes that there are a number of more general characteristics of ritual activity that often prevent it from being questioned by a community. Firstly, ritual possesses a 'timeless' or 'traditional' aspect (Bell 1997: 145); it is common that the neophyte feels that he/she is engaging with a

---

<sup>2</sup> A number of other ritual theorists have taken up Van Gennep's concept of liminality and developed it for their own purposes. Max Gluckman analyses rites of passage in terms of status reversal rituals in which social stratification is temporarily disrupted in order to secure its eventual stability. Edmund Leach characterises liminality as a tool for social control of boundaries between lands and individuals; liminality, according to Leach, aids relations between separate entities while also helping to ensure that the boundaries between these entities are kept secure. Mary Douglas analyses liminality in terms of boundaries between the socially accepted and the polluting or dangerous. Individuals or entities occupying a liminal zone are threatening to social order, she argues. For a more developed discussion of these scholars theories, see Rapport and Overing (2000 :230-232).



history that pre-existed him/her and will outlast him/her. Even when a certain ritual is relatively new, a considerable effort is made to hide its creative origins by surrounding these actions in pomp and ceremony, so as to imply that it is, in fact, an established or ancient rite. Ritual is a very formal activity that is governed by a system of rules (Bell 1997: 153) and these regulations should be followed without deviation. Finally, ritual activity is often invested with mystery through the use of esoteric actions and symbols (Bell 1997: 155); the ritual participant may not know why he/she has to perform a particular series of actions or what a particular symbol or object means within a ceremony, but he/she recognises that these actions are implemented by an order that exists above and beyond him/her, namely certain figures such as priests within the community, and that, in engaging with ritual, he/she is partaking in something bigger than him/herself. Ritual involves the individual within a higher order of things, whether it is a religious or societal order, and helps to establish a person within a community. In studying the significance of ritual activity during times of life-crisis, Van Gennep was the first anthropologist to note that the translation in status brought about through the rite of passage could also be mapped out spatially; this is to say that a person's separation from a social group, the resulting state of liminality, and his/her re-incorporation into another social group is effected by moving through designated ritually-significant zones or geographical areas. As we shall see in later chapters, this means that the state of liminality can be represented physically in space and time, e.g. on film. Van Gennep stated that all rites of transition were shaped by a certain pattern and could be separated out into: 'preliminal rites...liminal rites and postliminal rites.' (1960: 11) This schema of rites can be matched to the stages of separation, liminality and incorporation and helps to mark out clearly the neophyte's stage in the process. As a liminal entity, one is between two worlds; it is this aspect of the liminal person's character and the state of liminality more generally that Victor Turner develops in his analysis of Van Gennep's model.

Turner (1995: 95) characterises liminality as a period of ambiguity and humility for the neophyte: '(i)t is as though they [the ritual subjects] are becoming reduced or ground down to a uniform condition to be fashioned anew and endowed with additional powers to enable them to cope with their new station in life'. Liminal personae, by their very nature, are ambiguous entities; during this period, personal characteristics and the markings of individuality disappear, so that the neophyte becomes a blank slate upon which things can be inscribed. The neophyte is a 'passenger' (Turner 1995: 94) in the liminal phase because he/she travels between one state and another; the liminal entity is also described as being: 'betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial.' (Turner 1995: 95) Liminal personae do

not fit into any conventional category within organised society as they exist outside of the normally rigid, codified norms of hierarchical order and, in accordance with this, Turner (1995: 96) adopts the term 'communitas' to describe relations between neophytes in this liminal period. Communitas is: 'an unstructured or rudimentarily structured and relatively undifferentiated *comitatus*, community, or even communion of equal individuals who submit together to the general authority of the ritual elders'. Communitas is an important part of society's structure and some rituals are employed deliberately as a part of status-reversal ceremonies that remind those who are high in societal structure that they could not be so without the category of low status against which to define themselves: '(l)iminality implies that the high could not be high unless the low existed' (Turner 1995: 97). Liminality also plays an important part in reinforcing the generic human bond that pre-exists hierarchy and status; thus, liminal entities are often treated as sacred beings who exist apart from secular society because of their humility and their expressiveness of the universal human condition. Like liminal entities, liminal zones are areas that are inherently 'betwixt and between' (Van Gennep 1960: 95) societal and structured locations. Van Gennep notes that liminal personae tend to occupy regions of ambiguity where it is difficult to find one's coordinates, such as uninhabited forests: '(t)he neutral zones are ordinarily deserts, marshes, and most frequently virgin forests' (1960: 18). However, more commonplace areas, such as doorways and corridors, can also serve as settings for liminality. Thresholds have a heightened importance in a ritualised context as they demarcate the boundary between two areas: to stand on a threshold is to exist in a space that is in itself intrinsically 'between' two areas. Thresholds are particularly important in Van Gennep's theory as the act of crossing over one is ceremonially significant because it designates a change in status of the ritual participant and his/her separation from one world and incorporation into another. Van Gennep (1960: 20) notes that to cross a threshold is: 'to unite oneself with a new world'; indeed, in leaving his/her former society and entering into a liminal zone, the neophyte loses his/her former status and attributes and becomes an ambiguous figure who is subjected to trials and ordeals in preparation for his/her ensuing social role or status. As stated earlier, the concepts of crisis and liminality are not equated with deterritorialisation and becoming in this thesis; however, in examining the corpus of six films as loose representations of various rites of passage, it will become clear how these models can be usefully allied in order to draw out the ways in which 'crisis', 'ambiguity', 'transition' and 'metamorphosis' can be mapped aesthetically. With this in mind, I will now turn to the central tenets of Deleuzian theory used in this thesis.

Deleuze's work on cinema, although now a well-established approach amongst scholars in the field of film studies, is highly topical in terms of reading this corpus of films as a cinema of crisis because he takes crisis as his starting point in *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*.<sup>3</sup> Deleuze wrote two books on cinema in the 1980s; the first, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image* (2005a), which came out in 1983, focuses mainly on classical cinema in which time is subordinated to movement so as to achieve the resolution of a plot.<sup>4</sup> Deleuze delineates between different types of image, the most major of which is 'the action image' (2005a: 164); when scholars elaborate on the differences between Deleuze's description of the cinema of movement and the cinema of time, they tend to see the action-image as exemplary of the cinema of movement. This is not to say, however, that the two should be conflated; the action-image is a subset of the cinema of movement, but it is true that a cinema of time can be more easily defined against what it is not: a cinema of action. The second book, which came out in 1985, *The Time-Image* (2005), centres on a kind of cinema that challenges the classical narrative form. However, what distinguishes Deleuze's analysis of both types of cinema from other theoretical approaches is his focus on the film medium itself. Essentially, Deleuze's theories on cinema draw on what is integral to film as an artistic and individual medium; by contrast, other scholarly approaches use existing theories, such as psychoanalysis and feminism, and apply them *to* film. Deleuze, however, forms his theory *from* film. In his recent book on Deleuze, Reidar Due (2007: 159) notes: '(a) more intrinsic definition of Deleuze's work on cinema is that it attempts to articulate an aesthetics of film from the point of view of the film itself in abstraction from the conditions of film production and film reception.' Deleuze's philosophy of cinema demands that the viewer should not see a film simply as a representation of or commentary on the world, but also as an art form in which bodies and environments are processual, evolving and mutating in space and time. Classical cinema, according to Deleuze, takes movement as its subject; although Deleuze incorporates into his study of movement on film non-classical films, such as the works of Dziga Vertov, Sergei Eisenstein and Abel Gance in which movement derives from various forms of montage, his

---

<sup>3</sup> Texts such as D.N Rodowick's pioneering English language study *Gilles Deleuze's Time Machine* (2003), Steven Shaviro's *The Cinematic Body* (2005), Barbara M. Kennedy's *Deleuze and Cinema: The Aesthetics of Sensation* (2001), Patricia Pisters' *The Matrix of Visual Culture: Working With Deleuze in Film Theory* (2003) and Ronald Bogue's *Deleuze and Cinema* (2003) paved the way for further studies by usefully drawing out the implications of Deleuze's theories. These earlier texts, in part, explain Deleuze's abstruse concepts and demonstrate how they can be applied usefully to cinema. More recent studies have taken a more hybrid approach; though these latter studies do explain Deleuzian theory, they use it to enhance and illuminate certain types of film or ideas. Martine Beugnet's *Cinema and Sensation: French Film and the Art of Transgression* (2007) uses a phenomenological and Deleuzian approach to recent 'extreme' French cinema which lies between commercial and avant-garde strands so as to foreground the visceral aspects of the viewing experience; Anna Powell in *Deleuze, Altered States and Cinema* (2007) examines presentations of mental distortion, drug-induced hallucination and madness using Deleuzian theory; David Martin-Jones in *Deleuze and National Identity* (2007) applies Deleuzian theory to a number of recent and popular films and shows how his work can be politically topical in light of contemporary global events such as 9/11 or German Re-unification.

<sup>4</sup> Deleuze does examine non-classical cinema such as that of Eisenstein, Murnau and Vigo. However, it is through comparison with the 'action image' that scholars largely define a cinema of time. In discussing the cinema of action, Deleuze refers to D.W Griffith whose work is exemplary of the Hollywood continuity system.

analysis focuses broadly on the visual components of narrative-based or 'action' films, such as those of D.W. Griffith. Generally speaking, in the cinema of movement images are organised in a logical pattern so as to show both cause and effect, and the narrative can be mapped as a steady arc that moves from conflict through to resolution. Most importantly, time is experienced indirectly as the measure of movement and as the transition of an object from one place to another: '(m)ovement in its extension [is] the immediate given, and the whole which changes, that is, time, [is] indirect or mediate representation' (Deleuze 2005: 265). Accordingly, diegetic space is arranged so as to afford the solution of a given narrative problem and allow for ease of action. Time does appear in the cinema of the movement-image in a chronological or scientific 'measurable' format. By contrast, the modern cinema forsakes this devotion to movement in favour of a direct exploration of time, memory and thought and evidences the rise of disparate and anonymous spaces through which characters wander seemingly unable to react to what surrounds them.<sup>5</sup> One important consequence of this, for Deleuze, is the replacement of the active protagonist, who is associated with the cinema of movement, with the visionary or the 'seer' (Deleuze 2005: 2). In the cinema of action, characters are immersed in situations to which they know how to respond automatically and, consequently, the resolution of the film answers the problem posed at its opening. The cinema of time does not do this. According to Deleuze, the cinema of time is born out of a situation of crisis. In fact, the cinema of time is a cinema of crisis. For Deleuze, this crisis of the movement-image, or more specifically the action-image, was a result of the aftermath of the Second World War, the post-war landscape and the population's inability to make sense of the horror that had been encountered in this world: 'the post-war period has greatly increased the situations which we no longer know how to react to, in spaces which we no longer know how to describe.' (Deleuze 2005: xi) This crisis is shown through a number of visual 'symptoms': 'the form of the trip / ballad, the multiplication of clichés, the events that hardly concern those they happen to, in short, the slackening of the sensory-motor connections.' (2005: 3)

Although it would not be erroneous to argue that the emergence of a cinema of time within American independent cinema could be linked to the crisis in Iraq (American cinema of 1970s was, in part, a reaction to the war in Vietnam), it is not my intention to suggest this here. Firstly, two of the films included in the corpus of films discussed here were made before 9/11; secondly, I do not believe that the emergence of a cinema of time is as culturally and historically located as Deleuze implies in his work. Other scholars such as D.N. Rodowick have noted that: 'there is no

---

<sup>5</sup> Deleuze refers to such a space as 'any space whatever' (Deleuze 2005a: 113).



historical break between the movement-image and the time-image, for the direct-image of time is an ever renewable possibility recurring throughout the history of cinema.' (Rodowick 2009: 108) There is a proclivity for both kinds of cinema within the film industry and it has always been the case that many films (such as *The Virgin Suicides*) move between the modes of movement and time. Furthermore, the existence of a cinema of time does not preclude the existence of a cinema of movement; indeed, the cinema of the movement-image is still the dominant mode of filmmaking. Therefore, I suggest that the use of Deleuze's theories is legitimate even if one does not attribute a 'crisis' of the movement image to a historical movement or event. Notably, Deleuze only examined a selective group of American filmmakers (John Cassavetes, Shirley Clarke and Stanley Kubrick), but remained unenthusiastic about the films produced in the 1970s by directors such as Francis Ford Coppola and Martin Scorsese, whom he regarded as purveyors of one particular style: parody and irony. Aside from the cinema of Cassavetes, Clarke and Kubrick, Deleuze does not view American cinema as one of 'time' and 'thought'. One of my intentions in this thesis, therefore, is to delineate how this particular corpus of films not only display all the hallmarks of the 'breakdown of the action-image' (2005: 3), but also how these films move beyond these mere 'symptoms' to create a kind of cinema that challenges the boundaries of thought.

For Deleuze (2005: 3), these aspects of the breakdown of the movement-image in post-War cinema do not constitute a sufficient condition for the birth of the 'new image', since they are mere visual indicators of the modern malaise. Instead, images detached from any sensory-motor or narrative motivation, which Deleuze calls *opsigns* (2005: 325), enable the transition between the cinema of action and the cinema of time. The protagonist responds to these purely optical images, which are unfettered from narrative purpose, with contemplation rather than action because they cannot be readily assimilated and understood. Deleuze draws on Henri Bergson's theories of memory in *Matter and Memory* (2004), particularly his ideas relating to attentive recognition, to develop this idea and show how these purely optical images can be linked so as to form complete images of time. Deleuze states that in our quotidian interactions with the world, we rely on *automatic recognition* to facilitate action. What was once unfamiliar is absorbed into the body through habit; we know our way around our environment because our bodies are able to draw on immediately accessible memories to remind us of how we went about achieving this in the past. Our interactions with the world are thus, to use the phenomenological term, *intentional*: they are directed *towards* our environment. We negotiate our way through the world via our body, its responsiveness to our surroundings and the way actions and reactions are corporeally embedded



through habit. However, when something seems unfamiliar or unknown, the mind spirals back through ever-deeper layers of memory in order to make sense of it. This process of *attentive recognition* reveals the true nature of memory: as co-existing sheets of the past from which we extract information.<sup>6</sup> For Deleuze, the purely visual image, which is associated with the cinema of time, initiates an exploration of memory rather than aiding action. He goes on to show how these optical images can be linked with the processes of dream and memory, and finally how they can be related to images that reveal the foundation of time.

This 'pure optical image' (Deleuze 2005: 43), or purely visual image that requires an exploration of memory to try and make sense of it, is the antithesis of the cliché. The cliché, in Deleuzian terms, is primarily a 'sensory-motor image of the thing' (Deleuze 2005: 19) that is constituted either by calculated addition or subtraction from the thing itself in order to aid action. Alison Smith (1998: 52) writes more generally of clichés: 'they are easy to read, their meaning is obvious...such instant reading could be a form of instant possession'. The cliché does not promote thought or evoke mystery; its aim is precisely the opposite of this; we always recognise these images and know how to 'deal' with them automatically. Through a process of simplification and reduction, the cliché denies ambiguity, because it suggests that nothing escapes comprehension. Deleuze, drawing on Bergson, notes: 'we do not perceive the thing or the image in its entirety, we always perceive less of it, we perceive only what we are interested in perceiving, or rather what it is in our interests to perceive.' (2005: 19) The cliché allows for ease of action and it gains its meaning from *collective* employment. For Deleuze, the cliché is synonymous with both the cinema of the action-image and that of the time-image. In the former, the cliché is used as a kind of visual shorthand in order to facilitate narrative development, but in the latter it is the proliferation of stock images that is a sign of the birth of the modern cinema. Deleuze states that it should be the aim of modern cinematic directors to produce images that break through the cliché; the purely optical image emerges as a result of the visionary status of the cinematic protagonist who is in a state of crisis, but it also turns the cinematic spectator into a kind of visionary or pure seer. If the cliché keeps the viewer from really seeing and, according to Deleuze, from really thinking, the importance and power of the purely visual image, as something that can counteract the cliché, should not be underestimated. Deleuze (2005: 20) writes that: 'there is no knowing how far a real image may lead'. The purely

---

<sup>6</sup> Ronald Bogue (2003: 111-112) provides a useful exposition on the processes of attentive recognition: '(a)ttentive recognition...does not differ qualitatively from automatic recognition. In both cases we summon up a memory-image and project it onto the object. In attentive recognition...we pay closer attention to the object, we summon up memory-images from broader and more distant past contexts, each wider context encompassing the narrower.'

optical image, as we have seen, is the exact opposite of the cliché; its rarity does not aid action. Rather, it causes the mind to extend into the annals of memory as a way of making sense of what confronts us: 'the optical...image in attentive recognition does not extend into movement, but enters into relation with a 'recollection-image' that it calls up...what would enter into relation would be the real and the imaginary, the physical and the mental, the objective and the subjective, description and narration, *the actual and the virtual*.' (Deleuze 2005: 44) The purely optical image helps to enrich the relation between the actual and the virtual, the past and the present and the real and the hallucinatory.

What is most vital and curious about this process for Deleuze, however, is the failure to find a recollection-image that would make sense of an actual or current situation: '(i)n short, it is not the recollection-image or attentive recognition which gives us the proper equivalent of the optical-sound image, it is rather the disturbances of memory and failures of recognition' (2005: 52).

Deleuze suggests that the impossibility of finding a recollection-image to make sense of the optical image in the present moment, when coupled with the protagonist's lack of physical movement, creates a situation in which the mind travels through 'the past in general' (Deleuze 2005: 52) and sifts through dream and memory images, the corresponding signs of which he calls respectively *onirosigns* and *mnemosigns*. Deleuze (2005: 44) remarks that, although films that explore dream and memory point towards the inextricable relation between the present and past and tend towards 'a point of indiscernibility' between the two, they rarely combine these polarities so that it becomes impossible to decipher the difference between them. For Deleuze, the only true image of time is one that reveals the temporal nature of how memories are formed. Following Bergson's theories of memory (2004), Deleuze states that memories are formed in the present moment; the present splits and doubles itself, so as to create a 'virtual memory-image' alongside an actual 'perception image' (Bogue 2000: 118). The foundation of time, as this continual splitting in the present moment, is made clear in such an image through the genuine indecipherability between: 'the real and the imaginary, ...the present and the past, ...the actual and the virtual' (2005: 68). Such an effect is a genuine property of the time-image; it: 'is the objective characteristic of certain existing images which are by nature double' (2005: 68). This uncertain status of the image, of being neither surely real nor imaginary, of being neither certainly present nor past, is the definition of the modern image that Deleuze calls the *crystal*. In this thesis, the ambiguity of dream, memory and crystal images is linked with the state of liminality, while the cliché, as described earlier, is used throughout as a sign of crisis into which the purely optical image breaks.

Deleuze develops the concept of the crystal image in order to show how entire films can be characterised as being crystalline. For him, the films of Max Ophüls, Federico Fellini, Jean Renoir and Luchino Visconti can be likened to the crystal in varying degrees of perfection, formation and disintegration. However, he also describes three further ways that time can be expressed within cinematic form. Aside from in the crystal image, which blurs the boundary between the past and present and the virtual and the actual, time can also appear in 'sheets of the past', 'peaks of the present' (2005: 95) or as a 'series' (2005: 182). Deleuze labels these time-images *chronosigns* (2005: 95); the difference between the crystal image and the chronosign is the effect of this combination of the virtual and the actual and the past and the present. Chronosigns combine these polarities too, but what is in play here is no longer the past and the present, but the true and the false. Chronosigns are images of time that throw 'truth' into crisis (2005: 126). For Deleuze, the films of Orson Welles, Alain Resnais, Michelangelo Antonioni, Shirley Clarke and John Cassavetes are consummate examples of this kind of cinema because they use time as a disruptive force that decentres the way we think ordinarily.

The cinema of time has important ramifications for thought. Whereas the cinema of the movement image, or more specifically narrative 'action-based' cinema, is constructed around a question that is posed at the film's beginning and answered by its conclusion, the cinema of the time image poses a problem for thought through its very form. Images in the cinema of time are organised so as to counteract our habitual ways of thinking about things; irrational cuts, blank spaces, voids and discrepancies between sound and visual tracks converge so as to throw into crisis the viewer's relation to concepts such as truth and falsity. According to Deleuze, these visual and sonic markers are the by-products of a presentation of time that is not subordinated to movement on screen. 'The pure force of time...puts truth into crisis' (Deleuze: 2005, 126) and, in the process of doing so, reveals the provisional and manufactured nature of any accepted truth. The cinema of the time-image poses a problem to the viewer because time no longer appears in a scientific or chronological form. Rather, as we have seen, time appears in dispersed 'sheets of the past' or simultaneous 'peaks of the present' (2005: 95) that destabilise the viewer's sense of order and complicate our relationship with established ideas. This impacts directly on the idea of a consistent 'self', as time can also appear as the 'revealer of the deadline' (2005: 182) through the body. The body mutates, evolves or disintegrates and this negates the idea of a steady, enduring 'self'. Deleuze writes that, in the cinema of the time-image: 'I is another...has replaced Ego=Ego.'

(2005: 129) The self that evolves in time is fluid and cannot be pinned down or summed up; this is complicated even further by the splitting of the subject in time into the self that is preserved in memory and the self that is projected into the future. This idea of the self in crisis has much in common with Deleuze's work, with psychoanalyst Felix Guatarri (1930-1992), on the concepts of *becoming*, *detrterritorialisation* and *becoming-woman* (1988); as shall be seen in the body of the thesis, these ideas can be usefully linked to the work of Van Gennep and Turner.

Among the texts that Deleuze co-authored with Felix Guatarri are *Anti-Oedipus* (1972) and *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980); these two studies are now viewed as key reference points within the broad category of post-structuralism. Against the Freudian tenet that desire is a destructive force, Deleuze and Guatarri re-interpret it as a natural, positive and creative force at the heart of all forms of life. Within this study, *detrterritorialisation* and *becoming* are two major, co-dependent concepts. Deleuze writes that: 'in a becoming one is detrterritorialized.' (1988: 291) As we shall see in later chapters, detrterritorialisation involves a radical move away from hierarchical structures, established categories, concepts, objects, world-views, and received ways of thinking. Through detrterritorialisation, one moves closer to a state of *becoming* where random and unforeseen connections may be made and ossified identity is abandoned in favour of fluidity and changeability. *Becoming* is a process that is enabled through proximity, by two entities drawing close to each other and exchanging parts. We are involved every day in a near-invisible *becoming* with our environment, but the positive repercussions of this relationship can either be heightened or sealed off depending on our outlook or 'openness' to its possibilities. I will argue in later chapters that, while becoming and liminality are not equivalent, the latter can aid the former because it throws the neophyte or ritual subject into a state where 'openness' replaces boundaries and definitions. Liminality is a stage within which old habits and hierarchies are eschewed in favour of a loosely structured community wherein connections between people are made more easily. Turner (1969: 95) notes of liminal relations: 'neophytes tend to develop an intense comradeship and egalitarianism. Secular distinctions of rank and status disappear or are homogenized.' Furthermore, the process of grinding down the neophyte's identity in order to create a blank slate upon which new identities are inscribed is reminiscent of the process of metamorphosis that is so intrinsic to Deleuze's notion of becoming. Becoming is achieved through a series of stages that all start from the point of *becoming-woman*. For Deleuze and Guatarri, this does not literally mean becoming or imitating a woman; *becoming-woman* is becoming *minor* in opposition to *major* or hegemonic entities or beings that structure and order society. 'Man' is a major entity and therefore, its only opposition can be a *becoming-woman* – a literal movement away from established principles, ideals and



institutions, which creates possibilities for fluid interactions and unforeseen connections to be made in order to subvert major principles or institutions. This allows one to move away from 'major' modes of being and stable identities; Patricia Pisters (2003: 107) notes that: 'becoming-woman is in the first instance a procedure that allows one to live freely; otherwise one is paralyzed'. In breaking with any dominant entity, one becomes more open to moving towards a flow of intensities and, through relations of proximity, mixing and exchanging 'particles' (1988: 275) with one's surrounding environment. Taken together, as we shall see, these three concepts enable a fundamental de-centring of the self. We will now examine the ways in which these various 'disruptive' principles can be brought to bear on the corpus of films and used to illustrate themes of crisis, ambiguity, transition and change.

**Adolescence:** *The Virgin Suicides* (1999), *Elephant* (2003).

Sofia Coppola's *The Virgin Suicides* and Gus Van Sant's *Elephant* address the life-crisis of adolescence. Both of these films present this liminal state as a process of dissolution by recasting the passage from childhood to adulthood as the passage from life to death. What is made clear through the images in both films is the latent violence of this rite of passage that fashions individuals into 'roles' in preparation for adult society. These characters, as adolescents, are inherently in a state of crisis; on screen, they are presented formally as *figures of crisis* through the use of flattened, hollowed-out and stereotypical images; by their very presence within these complex films, these images draw attention to the 'thinness' of their own construction. In other words, the viewer's attention is continually directed towards what is *not seen* and *what is not heard* so that he/she can perceive a more complex reality. In these films, 'the real' slips through the image. Coppola, in her presentation of a variety of beautiful and iconographic images, suggests a disavowal of reality: something, in Deleuzian terms, 'intolerable' (2005: 19) in the image that cannot be faced. Van Sant presents the everyday in such a way as to render the 'ordinary' or 'banal' sinister. In both films, these themes are visually transcribed onto the bodies of the young protagonists which are exposed to a latent harm or threat and which appear on screen as figures of dissolution and disintegration. Mirroring adolescence as a state of crisis, the images themselves break down and disperse so that crisis is not merely present on a narrative level (which is made clear from the outset of both films), but most importantly is also manifest in the very bodies of the films themselves.

### *The Virgin Suicides.*

*The Virgin Suicides* is set in Michigan during the 1970s and relates the story of five teenage girls (Cecilia, Lux, Mary, Bonnie and Therese Lisbon) who all commit suicide. The Lisbon girls' story is told in retrospect by a male narrator who, years after their deaths, remains infatuated with them and tries to unravel their mystery. This male voice stands in for the brotherhood of boys who were, and continue to be, enamoured with the Lisbon girls and their feminine aura. Overtly, the film is about the trauma these boys suffer after the girls' suicides and their inability to deal with their deaths. On a formal level, Coppola is concerned with something quite different: the implicit violence of the adolescent rite of passage that fashions individuals into pre-prescribed roles and the irreparable harm this causes. It is this 'implicit violence' or reality that the boys truly cannot face up to. The film contains a lot of dream-like and fantastical imagery; Coppola deliberately draws upon advertising campaigns from the 1970s and the photography from this period by William Eggleston and Sam Haskins in order to create instantly recognisable images that are evocative of a particular kind of feminine beauty that is both ethereal and pornographic. The abundance of these kinds of images within the film serves a particular purpose: the viewer is assaulted by beauty and forced to look beyond the image and to acknowledge the 'reality' that slips through.<sup>7</sup> Rather than having a pacifying or lulling effect on the viewer, the accumulation of these various images of 'beauty' is disquieting and ominous. Mirroring the crisis effected on a thematic level, the film moves between the movement-image and time-image regimes, so that the process of trying to construct a narrative that would make sense of the tragedy or 'cover over' the reality of the girls' deaths is undone continually on a formal level. In his recent book on Deleuze and national identities, David Martin-Jones (2007) notes how the time-image is often used to un-ground 'stable' or 'truthful' visions of the past that help to re-enforce identities in the present. In *The Virgin Suicides*, the past acts as a force that confounds any attempt to form an 'explanation' for the tragedy; narrative scenes fracture and disperse into 'still' stereotypical images or dissolve of their own accord. The images become enchained through association as though in an oneiric fashion and the narrative becomes 'looser'. In other words, crisis and image become so entwined that what we are presented with finally can be said to be made up of crisis-images.

---

<sup>7</sup> Hal Foster has used this idea in conjunction with the writings of Roland Barthes on 'the punctum' and photography; See Foster (1996).



From the outset of *The Virgin Suicides*, Coppola casts the viewer into a world of clichés by visually referencing various subversive cinematic portraits of suburban America, such as *Blue Velvet* (1986) *Edward Scissorhands* (1990) and *Safe* (1995). The opening few shots of the film function like a set of tableaux which picture ‘idyllic’ scenes of summer. However, the ‘ideal’ nature of these shots is undercut subtly by the score and, finally, by the first interior shot within the Lisbons’ home. The sequence of shots are as follows: the first shot is of a pretty blonde girl sucking on a lollipop (it will transpire that this is Lux Lisbon); she stands in the middle of the street and the evening sunlight filters through her blonde hair creating a halo-type effect around her head; the background is kept out of focus so the girl in the foreground of the frame has the viewer’s undivided attention; cut to a long-shot of a man watering his immaculately-kept front lawn; he appears to be standing in a cove of sycamore trees into which the sun filters, lighting up the jet of water coming out of the hose-pipe; cut to two women walking a dog along a quiet and very clean street lined with large detached houses; again, the scene is lit with the soft, golden light of evening sunshine; cut to two tree surgeons placing a ‘notice of removal’ on a large sycamore tree; cut to a long shot of a man lighting a barbeque while his son plays basketball in the front drive; cut to a close up of the leaves of a sycamore tree through which the evening sunshine filters; a sudden cut to an interior shot of a bathroom provides a stark contrast to what has gone before, not merely because the film’s ominous-sounding score cuts out at this point, but also because the light in this shot is of a harsh grey-blue quality; a cut to a young girl who is dressed in a wedding gown and lying in a bathtub of bloodied water provides the logical conclusion to a set of scenes that seem to point towards the sinister rather than the idyllic. Overlaid over all of these scenes is the foreboding jazz score by the band Air, an ambulance siren that grows ever louder and the persistent sound of insects, such as cicadas and flies (by the end of the film, the town will be plagued by an insect and algae infestation so the final scenes are drenched in a sickly green colour).<sup>8</sup> By drawing the viewer’s attention towards what seems too ‘idyllic’ and by consciously using the stereotype and undercutting the overt beauty of the images through the soundtrack, Coppola points towards the dark reality behind this veneer. The shot of Cecilia in the bathtub is a case in point: Coppola allies her with tragic heroines such as Shakespeare’s Ophelia by referencing pre-Raphaelite portraiture (this image recalls strongly John Everett Millais’s portrait of the drowned ‘Ophelia’) and dressing her in a wedding gown, but she is lying in a bath full of blood and water. Given this somewhat subversive opening, it is not surprising that figures of

---

<sup>8</sup> The chords in Air’s score are played on a synthesiser and do not seem to resolve; they ‘hang’ between major and minor modes and create an unsettling atmosphere.

putative power and authority, when they do appear, are also portrayed through use of the stereotype. There are two scenes in *The Virgin Suicides* that centre on figures of authority and, in particular, on the ways in which these individuals deal with adolescents. In both cases, the authority figure is ridiculed, not merely through what he says, but also through how he is presented to the viewer.

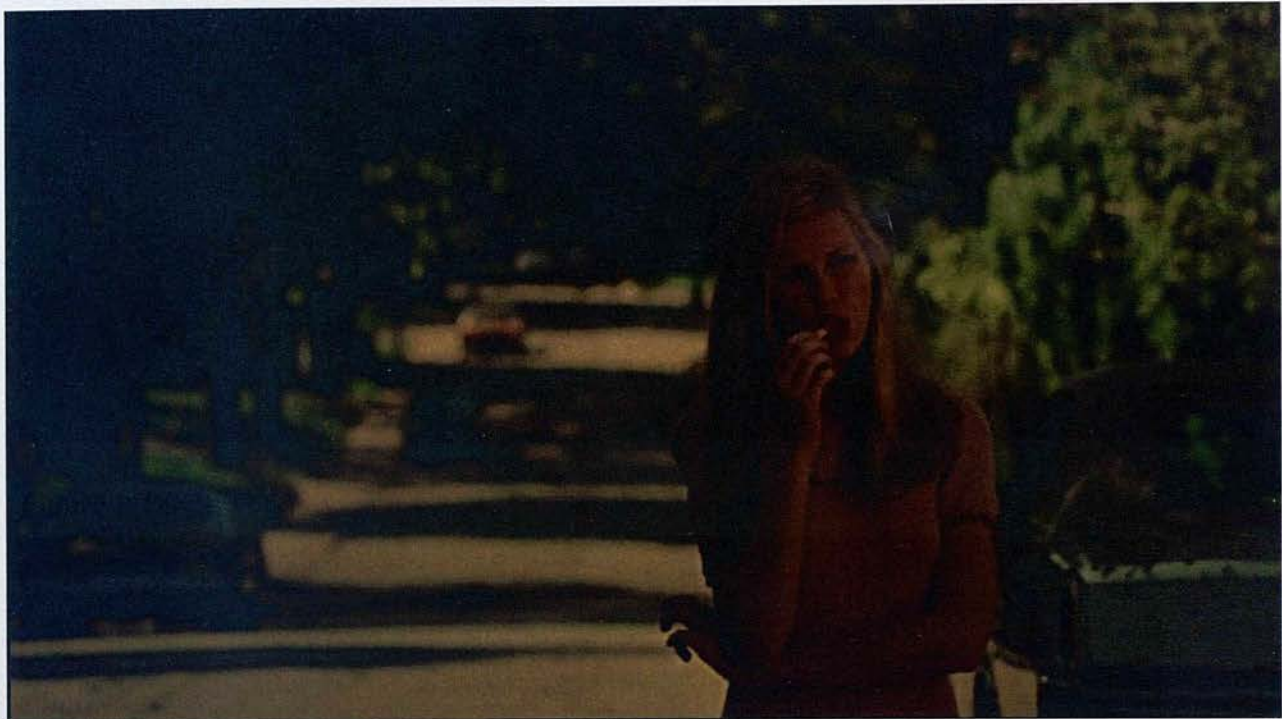


Figure 1: Lux Lisbon as Lolita.



Figure 2: Cecilia Lisbon as Ophelia.



The fact that Danny De Vito plays Dr Hornicker, the doctor who spuriously diagnoses Cecilia's act of suicide as 'a cry for help', is significant. Coppola plays not only on his small stature, but also on his status as a 'comic' actor in this representation: he is already a 'stock' character, a cinematic cliché. He is filmed in mid-shot and is perfectly centred in the frame so that the furniture in his office seems to tower over him; his title and status 'M.D, PhD', which are imprinted on a placard that is placed on his desk, are shown in the foreground of the frame; the discrepancy between his diminutive body and the prominence of his titles in the film frame immediately undercuts any assumption the viewer might have that the doctor is a figure of knowledge and authority here. Furthermore, this style of framing recalls multiple television serials in which authority figures are often shown to be corrupt and ineffective. The hospital, as an institution, is portrayed as dehumanising, a place in which individuality is suppressed through a ritualised medical apparatus. John S. Welch has noted the importance of ritual in Western medicine and its power to help turn an 'individual' into a 'patient' through various ritualised acts (the dressing of a person in a gown, the hooking up of an individual to mechanical apparatus, the translation of identity into facts and figures).<sup>9</sup> This is quite apparent in an early scene in the hospital in which Coppola chooses to focus initially on the medical apparatus that slowly instils life back into Cecilia rather than the patient herself. A shot of a saline drip overlaid with the regularised monotonous noise of a heart monitor visually and aurally re-enforce the inexorable beat of chronological, or scientific, time. Here, Cecilia is initially subsumed within a *mise en scène* of control and her presence on screen literally becomes peripheral in comparison to the institution she is within and the authority figures who represent it; an anonymous, white-coated figure, seen in the foreground of the frame, towers over her and notes down her progress on a chart: health is 'measured' out, plotted and planned so that a solution can be found. The viewer sees and hears the medical apparatus that is bringing her back from the dead *before* Cecilia is even presented in the shot: her body appears as part and parcel of the medical apparatus. This scene in the hospital is followed by the film's title sequence, the oneiric style of which radically undercuts this *mise-en-scène* of control and manipulation. The super-impositions and dissolves contained within the titles serve to un-ground or de-centre, by way of contrast, the tight and precise framing of this medical scene that precedes it and hint at the subversive theme at the heart of the narrative.

---

<sup>9</sup> See Welch (2003: 21-33).



**Figure 3: Opening credits from *The Virgin Suicides*.**

Like the doctor, the priest is presented as an ineffectual individual who fails to perform the main rituals that can aid an individual in a time of death and grief.<sup>10</sup> From the outset of the scene in which Father Moody visits the Lisbon family after Cecilia's second (successful) suicide attempt, he is shown on screen as a person who fails to instate his authority; indeed, he is a non-presence in these scenes, a shadowy figure who occupies the margins of the film frame, who remains incapacitated and hesitant on every threshold and who is ignored by the other characters. He is initially presented as a blurred, black-clothed figure that is partially obscured by the frosted glass of the Lisbons' front door. Once he is inside the Lisbons' home, he is isolated immediately; his stark, black clothing stands out against the beige colour scheme of the decoration, while his attempts to instigate conversation with the members of the family prove futile. He is an outsider in this environment: even the 'squeaking' noise of his leather shoes, which Coppola deliberately heightens, is intrusive. One notable aspect of the manner in which Coppola films this scene is the implication of a 'third presence' within each shot. As Father Moody walks around the house, he is filmed from afar, as though he is being observed; two prominent examples of this are the long shot of Mary opening the front door to Father Moody and the medium close-up of Father Moody talking to Mr Lisbon. These two shots are seen from a partially obscured and surreptitious point of view that is neither strictly objective nor subjective; this is to say that these shots are actually

<sup>10</sup> For studies on the role a priest plays in a time of grief, see Lount and Hargie (1997: 247-260) and Wuthnow et al.(1980: 408-421).



suggestive of Cecilia's viewpoint; although she is not seen as a ghost here, her spiritual presence is visually inscribed into the whole sequence. As a ghost, Cecilia makes a mockery of Father Moody's profession since, as a priest, part of his role is to ensure the safe progression of an individual into the afterlife.

### *The Realm of the Cliché and The Reality That Slips Through.*

More profoundly disturbing than this initial representation of a fracturing society is Coppola's location of crisis within images of the adolescent, and specifically female, body and her recuperation of cinematic and cultural clichés that serve to cover over partially this crisis. The cumulative effect of Coppola's use of a variety of stereotypical representations of 'American beauty' is unnerving, if not sinister. The cliché plays the most crucial role in Coppola's realisation of crisis within the image. As we have seen, for Deleuze (2005: 2-3, 19-20), the cliché serves a dual purpose in cinema: it allows for ease of action as it can be readily assimilated and understood as a form of cultural shorthand, while an awareness of the cliché signals a crisis within the cinema of movement. The superficiality of the clichéd image is apparent as action starts to break down and, in such a situation, something that exceeds the representative limitations of the cliché begins to slip through. In the case of *The Virgin Suicides*, Coppola knowingly and continually uses hackneyed imagery that is borrowed from well-referenced advertising, photography and soft pornography in order to intimate at a darker reality underlying this initial representation. Coppola's use of celebrated photographic images compliments her fascination with the cliché as the French meaning of the word 'cliché' can also denote a photograph. Scholars from Roland Barthes (1993) to Susan Sontag (1979) have noted the link between photography and death, which seems relevant to Coppola's project: the clichéd images of the Lisbon girls really connote death and decay, not youth and beauty. There are two key scenes that demonstrate this 'darker' reality in different ways: the crowning of Lux Lisbon and Trip Fontaine as Homecoming queen and king and the imaginary sequence initiated by the reading of Cecilia's diary.

Trip Fontaine and Lux Lisbon are the 'dream couple' of their high school year group; he is the captain of the football team and the boy every girl wants to date, while Lux is an enigma, the subject of endless gossip and speculation and, true to the Latin etymology of her name, the

source of inspiration for many schoolboy fantasies. These characters are played by Josh Hartnett and Kirsten Dunst, two actors who were considered to be exemplary of a particular kind of American adolescent beauty at the time of the film's making. Coppola draws her inspiration for this sequence from Brian de Palma's horror film about adolescent female crisis *Carrie* (1976). In his article *Où est le sang des vierges?*, Jean-Marc Lalanne notes the similarity between the two films stating that they share: 'les mêmes esthétiques seventies, mêmes slows sirupeux, même consécration du jeune couple d'amoureux comme roi et reine du lycée, même scénographie..., même premier baiser sur la piste.' (2000: 97) There are also notable differences between the scenes though: any suggestion of horror or abjection is effaced from Coppola's image and unlike *Carrie*, who is menstruating, Lux is about to undergo another adolescent rite of passage altogether: the loss of virginity. Throughout this sequence, Lux and Trip are the focus of the viewer's attention even though they are actually seen on screen rarely. Coppola cuts to the frenetic activity around them as the students dance and throw balloons in the air; the camera pans and cuts sharply in these moments as though mirroring the excited movement of the protagonists. By contrast, when Coppola does focus in on Lux and Trip dancing together, she frames them tightly in close-up to abstract them from their surroundings and uses slow-motion to accentuate their status as an 'iconic' couple. Coppola's visual style in the homecoming sequence is strongly reminiscent of photographs taken by Bill Owens of a prom from his work entitled 'Suburbia' (1973). In this collection of photographs, Owens focuses on the 'communal' aspect of suburbia: coffee mornings, barbeques, school playgrounds and popular ceremonies such as the prom; Owens's portraits are very positive representations of suburban communities, which perhaps, in part, explains their abiding popularity. While Coppola has admitted to admiring Owens's work, she imbues her images with a darker undercurrent by simultaneously referencing De Palma's horror film.<sup>11</sup> The ominous and unsettling elements contained within the homecoming sequence seem to break through into the image in the following sequence: implicit within the scene in which Lux loses her virginity to Trip is the possibility that he may have raped her. Indeed, Coppola's use of an ellipsis in this sequence induces anxiety in the viewer: the sexual act is made sinister by its very absence here.

The scene takes place in the open and fluorescently lit liminal space of the school football field. This is a space that has much in common with the ritualised, liminal zones of a rite of passage. As

---

<sup>11</sup> See 'Sofia Coppola: A Fizzy Debut'. 2000. <[http://history.sffs.org/great\\_moments/great\\_moments.php?id=19](http://history.sffs.org/great_moments/great_moments.php?id=19)> accessed 9/11/2009.



Van Gennep (1960: 18) notes of the liminal space: '(t)he neutral zones are ordinarily deserts, marshes, and most frequently virgin forests where everyone has full rights to travel and hunt.' This description of the liminal space is similar to Deleuze's description of the 'originary world' (2005a: 127); for example: '(t)he originary world may be marked by the artificiality of the set (...a studio forest, or marsh) as much as by the authenticity of a preserved zone (a genuine desert, a virgin forest)' (2005a: 128). The originary world is one that is readily recognisable and may seem quite ordinary, but it is governed by primordial drives. Here, the protagonist may resemble an animal in his behaviour as this 'originary' world pre-exists moral definitions. Deleuze states that in an originary world: 'acts are prior to all differentiation between the human and the animal' (Deleuze 2005a: 128). In this scene, the football field, which is usually the site of spectacle, is transformed into a liminal space in which the male adolescent's rite of passage is dramatised as he is subjected to various ordeals and has his endurance and strength tested. An aggressive and predatory version of masculinity is promoted out on the football field and although this is a place governed by particular norms and codes of practice, these rules blur the boundary between wanton and sanctioned violence. Indeed, there are certain forms of behaviour that are allowed on the football field that are not permitted anywhere else. This is made clear when Trip playfully tackles Lux; she laughs about this as Trip turns his forceful tactic into a hug, but the implication of this action is that his 'play' is aggressive and that sex with him will involve violence and possibly violation. Lux has become a part of Trip's adolescent rite of passage here; The neon quality of the floodlights that bears down on them turns the sexual act into a spectacle; indeed, the film viewer's link to the voyeur is made all the more apparent as there is no diegetic audience to 'witness' this spectacle. Tradition dictates that the 'jock' must accumulate many sexual conquests if he is to complete his rite of passage, so Trip abandons her when she has served her purpose. He does not emerge unscathed from this experience though; the one scene in the film that takes place in the present shows Trip being interviewed in a rehabilitation centre for alcohol and drug abusers. He admits that his problems started after he left Lux out 'on that open field' to fend for herself. Like the other males in the film, he has been left damaged by the experience of adolescence.

Of course, Lux is left broken from this encounter as well and Coppola emphasises visually the cost she pays: loss of innocence; loss of reputation, punishment for all time. When she wakes up alone on the football field in the early hours of the morning, she is lit by the harsh grey-blue light that Coppola associates with death throughout the film. Coppola's visual source for this shot is an untitled photograph taken by William Eggleston in 1975. Coppola references this bucolic image of a young girl lying in a grass field wearing a floral dress by framing Lux lying on the ground in her



floral prom dress in a similar way to that of Eggleston's framing of his young subject. However, Coppola gives the viewer the negative correlate of this image. What we have here is not a picture of youthful freedom, but one of loneliness and abuse. Indeed, from this moment in the film onwards, the girls, but particularly Lux, tend to look less youthful and more tired; this is clear in a later shot of Lux in which she is seen smoking on the Lisbons' rooftop after a sexual encounter with an anonymous man. Prior to her transgression, Coppola's camera focuses in on her soft flesh and dimples and she is associated with the light of an orange sunset or the bright light of a summer's day. Later on in the film, she is lit by this aforementioned grey light that serves to emphasise the angularity of her face and bony body. All of the girls pay for Lux's transgression and Coppola films them in the same manner from this moment on in the film; indeed, they appear increasingly in a group, often with their limbs enfolded together as though they were one body. Mirroring Lux's decay is the Lisbons' house that seems to decompose further and more quickly after these events. A time lapse sequence shows the decay of the house taking shape: rubbish builds up outside and festers; piles of leaves appear and spread like a carpet across the lawn; the curtains close, never to be opened again and the golden light of summer changes into the more foreboding and liminal light of evening.



Figure 4: Untitled portrait by William Eggleston.





**Figure 5: The darker side of Eggleston's vision.**

In the imaginary sequence caused by the boys' reading of Cecilia's diary, we see further examples of the cliché being used as a subversive image; here, the images tend towards being optical as they exceed the limitations of the cliché, something which, as noted earlier, is synonymous with a cinema of the time-image for Deleuze. Cecilia's diary is a ritual object that plays a fundamental part in the boys' worship of the girls. They read it in order to find a rational explanation for her suicide, but also because they believe that it will provide a revelation about the very mystery of life. However, the comical contrast between her tedious diary entries ('today we had pizza for dinner') and the boys' need to read them as profoundly suggestive of her suicidal psyche serves to remind the viewer of just how elaborate the boys' fantasies are. When they read about the Lisbon family's outing on a boat and the girls' sighting of a whale, an insert of 'home movie' footage appears; like so many other images of the girls, this scene is rendered through fantasy. This fictional moment is shown on 8mm stock that lends the footage a delicate, nostalgic quality. Martine Beugnet (2007: 134) comments on the specificity of super-8 images: 'fluttering as if they were animated by an inner pulsation ... (t)he silent scenes and bodies that appear on the screen, as well as the body of the film itself... convey a strange and affecting sense of vulnerability... the fragility of the super-8 film is always perceptible.'<sup>12</sup> The brittleness of the image brought about by its ephemeral, light-filled quality helps to give visual expression to themes of disintegration and

---

<sup>12</sup> Beugnet is writing with reference to Chantal Akerman's *La Captive* (2000).



loss. It is also significant that this short sequence is of Lux as she is the focal point of and inspiration for the boys' fantasies; here, it is the 'dream girl' who is dissolving and disintegrating on the grainy film. More specifically, the boys are manufacturing a false memory, an image from the past that could never exist in actuality, which lends this short sequence an added level of poignancy.



**Figure 6: Super-8 sequence.**

What follows on from this is a further overtly 'false' sequence made up of super-impositions and dissolves; here, Coppola visually references advertising and soft pornographic images from the 1970s. This is to say that, once again, Coppola places the viewer in the realm of the cliché. The shots in this sequence are as follows: a light-filled long shot of Cecilia sitting in a corn field dressed in her white wedding gown and writing in her diary; dissolve to a superimposition of a close-up of Lux's right eye, her golden hair back-lit by sunshine; dissolve to a close-up of Cecilia's diary with a superimposition of a unicorn over it; dissolve to a shot of Lux playing in a corn field; dissolve to a mid-shot of Therese chewing on a piece of corn over which Mary's face is superimposed; dissolve to a back-lit mid-shot of Lux wearing a Hawaiian Lei flower-garland that hangs suggestively over her breasts; dissolve to a close-up of Cecilia in profile writing in her diary, over which is superimposed a sparkler; dissolve to an image of Mary moving a sparkler in the air superimposed over a shot of a cloudy blue sky; dissolve to a shot of Therese on a swing hanging from a tree; dissolve to four further short shots of Bonnie, Mary and Therese in profile back-lit by sunshine. Coppola states that she took inspiration from the 'Timotei' and 'Breck' campaigns from the 1970s when designing this sequence: '(w)e talked a lot about Breck commercials...those are certainly my references from that era, old photos and advertising...a lot of that style came from the Playboy shoots of the time, with the back-lit hair, with the girl in

nature. That was the fantasy girl of that era' (Hays: 2000) Significantly, the 'Breck girl' in the 1970s was the actress, Brooke Shields who became famous through her portrayal of a thirteen-year-old prostitute in Louis Malle's highly controversial film *Pretty Baby* (1978). In the film, Brooke's character is both precociously sexual and childishly innocent, both of which are traits that the Breck advertisements play on. Similarly, in Coppola's film, the Lisbon girls are both child-like beings and the sexualised objects of male desire; aside from allusions to advertising campaigns, Coppola is also referencing the soft pornographic pictures of Sam Haskins as exemplified in his book *Five Girls* (1962). The women in Haskins's pictures are extremely petite in their frame or build and often resemble schoolgirls. He frames them in order to emphasise their small frames and enlarge their faces and eyes so that their heads appear to be bigger than their bodies. He also shoots his subjects in natural settings and light; his images often seem to be over-exposed and grainy, which lends the pictures a delicate and ethereal quality. Tellingly, Coppola uses the photographer Corrine Day to achieve a similar effect in her film; Day is a controversial figure within the art world; she came to prominence as a fashion photographer after her work with a fourteen-year-old Kate Moss was published in 'The Face' and 'Vogue' magazines. In these photographs, a skeletal and child-like Moss appeared in her underwear framed by a garland of fairy-lights. Day uses a similar aesthetic to create this sequence in *The Virgin Suicides* in which the girls appear as the unwitting objects of male fantasy or a variant of the literary and cinematic character of 'Lolita'. In other words, by giving the viewer so many variations on a particular kind of specifically American, blonde beauty, Coppola draws attention not only to the very thinness of these images as they are immediately graspable and comprehensible, but also to the darker context of these popular representations of femininity. While this sequence is exemplary of the cliché in Deleuzian terms, as that which keeps us from seeing 'the thing or the image in its entirety' (2005: 19), it is also indicative of the collapse of sensory-motor understanding. The accumulative effect of this plethora of images is disquieting; the entire sequence is already recognisable to the viewer as a kind of sexual fantasy. Rather than helping to make sense of the Lisbon girls' mystery, these images literally fragment and dissolve in front of the viewer's eyes. The viewer is struck continually by the hollow nature of these images: they only exist on a surface level, they are images of crisis that point towards something that Deleuze would term 'unbearable' or 'intolerable' (2005: 19). The inability to grasp meaning through these images is summed up at the end of the sequence by the narrator who says: 'we knew that they [the Lisbon girls] knew everything about us and that we couldn't fathom them at all.'





Figure 7: Dream girl.





Figure 8: The photography of Sam Haskins.



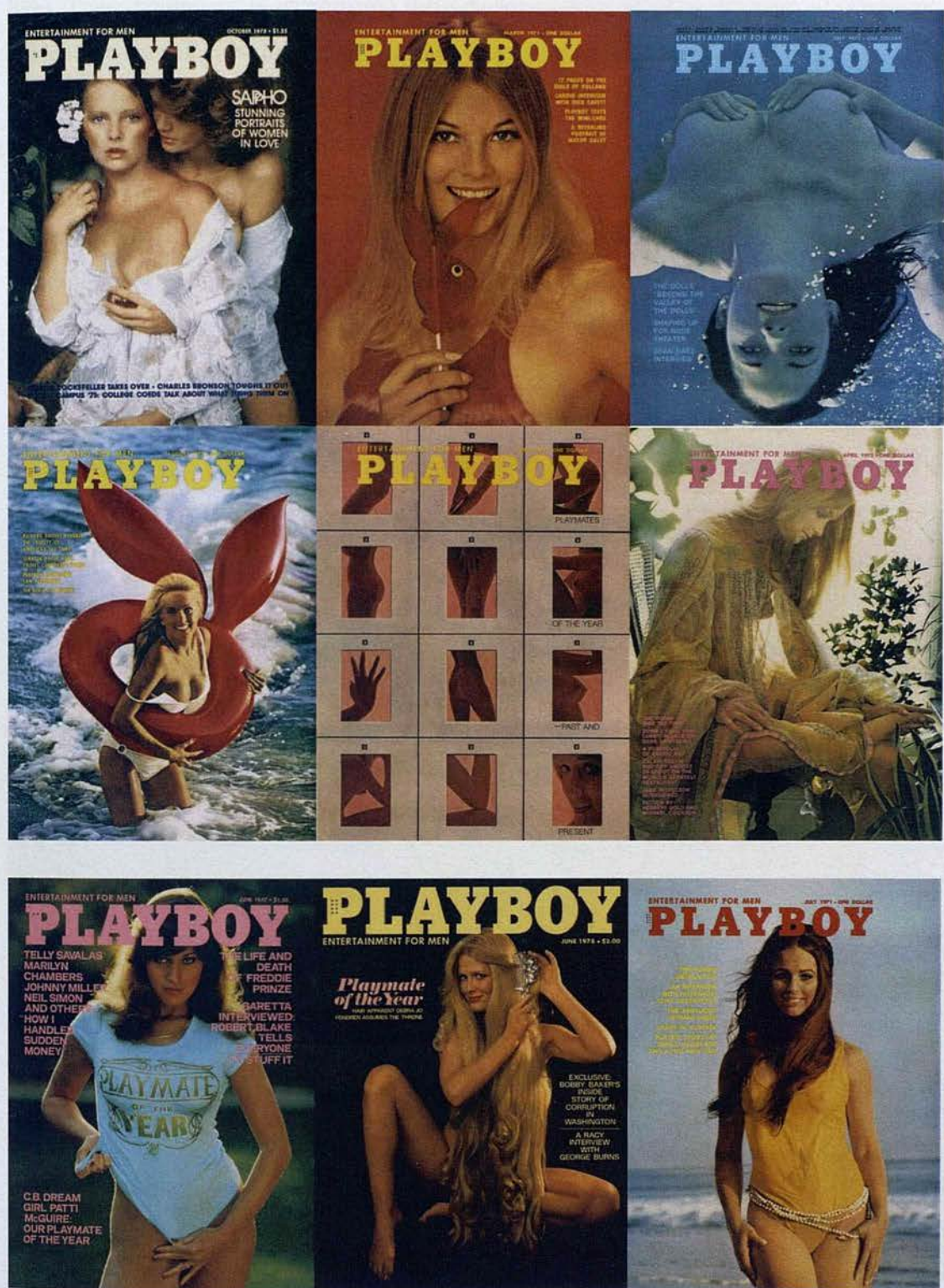


Figure 9: Playboy covers from the 1970s.

Coppola also subverts the conventional use of the cliché by emphasising the 'impossible' aspect of the images she is using. These dream-like/fantasy sequences have an over-exposed, light-filled



quality to them; the girls appear as though they were lit from within or surrounded by halos of light. Their 'whiteness' is accentuated through their attire, which is made up of predominantly pastel colours; towards the end of the film, they are seen dressed in white nightgowns. Indeed, in this latter section of the film, Coppola lights the girls from below so that they appear as ghostly apparitions. The lighting scheme, then, plays a key part in Coppola's casting of these girls as 'ideal' or 'perfect' visions of femininity. Suitably, three of them are named after saints (Cecilia, Therese and Mary) and Coppola associates them continually with iconography relating to saintliness not only through their white and pale blue dress code, but also through her framing of them. Coppola's profile shots of the girls' are formed of tight and close framings that tend to collapse foreground and background which gives these images a quality of 'flatness'; furthermore, her lighting scheme, as discussed earlier, helps to make the girls appear as illuminated figures. Taken together, these elements of the image strongly recall similar qualities found in Medieval iconography of saints, specifically female ones. Given this, it seems a deliberate addition on Coppola's part that the girls use a picture of the Virgin Mary as a kind of calling card to the boys.



**Figure 10: Becoming-ghosts.**

Coppola's association of the girls with light and the colour white lends them an 'impossible' kind of beauty. Richard Dyer (1997: 78) notes of the colour white and its cultural associations throughout history with virginity, cleanliness and saintliness that this kind of 'whiteness' is

completely ideal and cannot exist in reality; he writes: '(w)hiteness, really white whiteness, is unattainable. Its ideal forms are impossible' and that it is often Western women who are portrayed culturally in this manner, '(i)dealised [Western]white women are...permeated by light...they glow.' (1997: 122) Through this ideal vision of the girls, Coppola emphasises the fictional and paradoxical aspects of these images; the boys construct collectively a mental image of the girls that is, as noted earlier, laden with imagery culled from advertising, soft pornography and, paradoxically, representations of virginal purity. In other words, in creating this mental picture of the girls, the boys draw on the most idealised aspects of manufactured and artificial femininity. The Lisbon girls possess a particular type of American teenage beauty that connotes innocence and wholesomeness as well as burgeoning sexuality.<sup>13</sup> The boys are in thrall to this beauty and are reduced to the status of cinematic voyeurs quite often in the film; indeed, the first time we see them, they are sitting outside the Lisbons' home waiting for a glimpse of the girls; when the girls are introduced for the first time, Coppola freeze-frames each girl, while their names appear in a childish scribble on the left-hand side of the screen; here, Coppola implicates the viewer in the boys' voyeurism by, to borrow Laura Mulvey's term (Thornham 2003:63) offering them up as 'spectacle'. The girls' presence onscreen literally halts the film's (albeit loose) narrative drive. Likewise, the boys' fantasies of the girls will propel increasingly the film in its very form into the realm of dream and hallucination.

Coppola offers the viewer a complex and multi-layered representation of female adolescence; the girls escape and complicate the clichés the boys use to try and sum them up with, and thus they remain unfathomable to them. As we have seen, the role of the cliché as something that covers over complexity and depth is significant in the film because it indicates that there is a reality about the girls that the boys/men cannot face. Moreover, the French meaning of the word 'cliché' as a photograph is also noteworthy within this context as it denotes an image that sums up an abstract moment in space and time by stopping or stilling movement. In *On Photography*, Susan Sontag (1979: 15) reminds the reader that all photographs: 'are memento mori. To take a photograph is to participate in another person's...mortality, vulnerability, mutability. Precisely by slicing out this moment and freezing it, all photographs testify to time's relentless melt.' The boys save photographs of the girls from the artefacts left behind by Mr. and Mrs Lisbon after the family tragedy, and these images are treated as ritualistic objects that could provide a pathway back to the girls and help them to solve their mystery. However, as Sontag notes of the photograph: '(p)hotographs, which cannot themselves explain anything, are inexhaustible

---

<sup>13</sup> Sam Mendes's film *American Beauty* (1999) centres on a young female with precisely these qualities of beauty.



invitations to deduction, speculation and fantasy.’ (1979: 23) Just as the other objects that they collect, such as Cecilia’s diary, act as catalysts for flights of dream, fantasy and illusion, so the photographs of the girls trigger nothing but further immersion in the realm of romantic fantasy. One moment in the film demonstrates well the cultural connection the photograph has with mortality. During a scene in which the school photograph is taken, Coppola, in a series of sudden and rapid cuts, focuses in on Lux Lisbon’s face until, finally, her eyes fill the film frame. Heard over the top of this series of shots is the narrator’s voice reporting statistics on the phenomenon of adolescent suicide and possible warning signs to look out for amongst one’s peer group. In retrospect, the narrator tries to search for clues as to whether the girls’ suicides could have been predicted; as the camera closes in on Lux’s face, the image grows grainy and seems to disintegrate. The image of Lux dissolves before any meaning can be projected on to it; in this way, Coppola supplies the viewer with a poignant visual reminder of the incomprehensibility of such tragedies. The moment the viewer tries to ‘sum’ Lux up is also the moment that she escapes the grasp of understanding. More specifically, this image reminds us of the passing of time and the photograph’s ability to commemorate what is lost to us. In this sequence, Coppola uses the photograph, or cliché, as a form of memento mori that tends towards the ‘optical’ (Deleuze 2005: 17) in that exceeds the limits of its own representation and points towards what is *not* shown in the image.

### *The Crisis of Comprehension: The Movement-Image and Time-Image Regimes.*

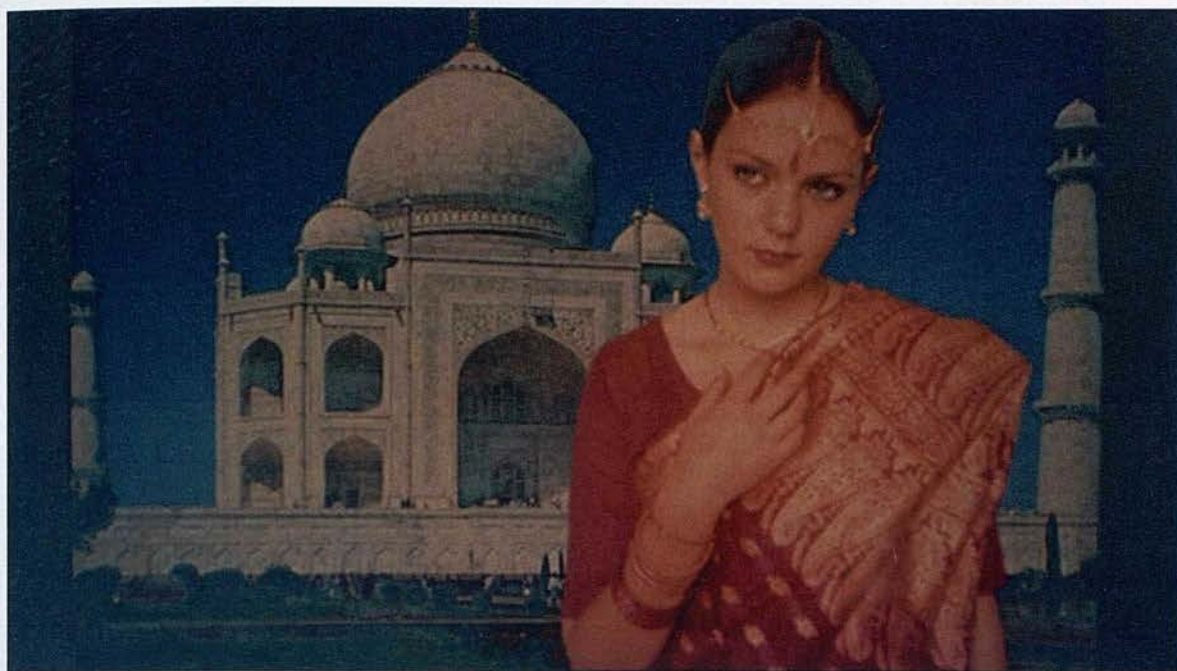
*The Virgin Suicides* is a film that moves between the movement-image and time-image regimes; Deleuze acknowledges that a pure cinema of time is very rare. Often it is the case that a film is in transition between the regimes of movement and time; he writes: ‘(t)here is...a necessary passage from the crisis of the action-image to the pure optical-sound image. Sometimes it is an evolution from one aspect to the other...sometimes the two coexist in the same film like two levels, the first of which serves as merely a melodic line for the second.’ (2005: 4). Coppola’s film is constructed out of allusive and imaginary elements and sequences that would appear to fit within both a cinema of the movement-image and a cinema of the time-image. Careful viewing reveals certain details that tend to falsify the narrative as it is presented to the viewer, which allies the film more strongly with a cinema of the time-image. Ultimately, the investigation of what Deleuze would term ‘the sheets of the past’ (2005:95) yields a history that is highly questionable in its order and explanation of events. The exploration of different memories or versions of the

past, which forms the film's central conceit, leaves the central protagonists, and by extension the viewer, with a complete void of understanding. Deleuze (2005:119) writes that in modern cinema: 'sometimes we only produce an incoherent dust made of juxtaposed borrowings; sometimes we only form generalities which retain mere resemblances. All this is the territory of false recollections with which we trick ourselves or try to trick others.' The fact that the film seems to travel between the two regimes of movement and time is suggestive of both the narrator's struggle to construct a narrative that would 'make sense' of the past and a more general inability to form a 'truthful' representation. As we have seen, in *The Virgin Suicides* sequences are frequently ungrounded by images that are imaginary, dream-like and, often, overtly false so that crisis is evident on both narrative and formal levels. The crisis of acceptance or understanding is mirrored in the fragmented and grainy imagery through which the narrative is related.

As mentioned earlier, the passage between the movement and time images in cinema and its relation to the construction or deconstruction of a 'truthful' narrative is explored by David Martin-Jones in his book *Deleuze and National Identity* (2007). In particular, by examining films such as *Run Lola Run* (1998), *Memento* (2000) and *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (2004), Martin-Jones demonstrates how nations that have experienced a crisis of identity use cultural mediums, in this case cinema, to re-construct, re-enforce or question existing or former national identities. While this is clearly not the issue at the heart of Coppola's film, Martin-Jones's model is a useful one for examining *how* crisis is dealt with on a formal level through the transition from movement to time images and vice versa. In terms of Deleuze's theory of the time-image, the structure of *The Virgin Suicides* represents a return to the past that does not yield a 'recollection-image' that would make sense of the present. Deleuze (2005: 52) writes that it is 'not the recollection-image or attentive recognition which gives us the proper equivalent of the optical-sound image, it is rather the disturbances of memory and the failures of recognition.' In Coppola's film, the narrator fails continually in his task of 'making sense' of the past; rather, the Lisbon girls, as we have seen, are recalled through fantastical imagery that disperses and breaks apart the seemingly more linear parts of the narrative. Deleuze, writing with reference to the cinema of Marcel Carné states that there: 'is a multiplicity of circuits each of which goes through a zone of recollections and returns to an even deeper, even more inexorable, state of the present situation.' (2005: 46) In the case of *The Virgin Suicides*, an investigation of the past only re-enforces the boys'/men's inability to comprehend in the present moment.

One scene in particular displays this tension between trying to construct a truthful history and the impossibility of such a task. Once the girls are incarcerated by their mother, they take solace in ordering holiday brochures of exotic places and make journeys to these countries in their minds; the boys order the same catalogues in order to share these journeys with them: physical immobility is replaced with journeys inspired by the imagination. A slide show of make-believe holiday pictures evidences the highly artificial nature of these journeys though; Coppola foregrounds the synthetic and constructed qualities of the latter images by drawing attention to discrepancies in the scale of objects included within the frame, the use of 'cut-out' or superimposed images and their flat, overtly two-dimensional appearance. The boys resurrect Cecilia from the dead and posit her as a bride in a sari posing outside the Taj Mahal; Lux is seen hugging one of the boys by the Great Wall of China, and other familiar sites of pilgrimage such as Egyptian tombs and Chinese pavilions also feature. The most fascinating aspect of this slideshow occurs when the images literally run out and leave a repeated white screen in their wake. This recurring white image is similar to Deleuze's description of the most rarefied optical image that is the antithesis of the cliché; he writes: 'sometimes...it is necessary to...introduce voids and white spaces' (2005: 20) in order to break through the cliché. In the film, this moment of void provides a powerful image that counteracts the effects of the cliché by sending the mind back through the ever-expanding sheets of memory in order to make sense of it. The fact that the girls cannot be fully described by stock scenarios and images is evident in the failure of this slide show to satisfy the boys. Like Deleuze's autonomous, rarefied visual image, the images of the girls break through the clichés that the boys use to describe them. The boys try continually to construct a narrative of sorts, which places the girls and the boys together at its centre, but Coppola counteracts this by drawing the viewer's attention toward the overtly 'false', and therefore 'impossible', quality of these images. Moreover, the white screen introduces a void into the scenario that de-centres what has appeared before it. Here, time as a disruptive force is re-inserted into the image and prevents once more linear progression.





**Figure 11: Cecilia as a bride in Calcutta.**

Another way in which Coppola illustrates the pull of the movement-image towards the time-image in her film is through the addition of elements to the more 'realistic' or believable scenes that render the latter unstable or potentially false. For instance, the first kiss between Lux and Trip is an example of this infiltration of the imaginary into a seemingly realistic or everyday scenario. Lux seems to emerge as if from nowhere and furiously mauls Trip with her kissing and leaves her bubble gum in his mouth, while the heavy rock guitar solo that accompanies this sequence is a stereotypical way of suggesting an attraction between the two characters. The spectator does not see Lux cross the threshold into Trip's car, which suggests that she has simply materialised there. Furthermore, moments before this, Trip lays his head back onto the car's headrest and closes his eyes as though he is dreaming. This could be an erotic encounter that exists only in Trip's mind or the boys'/men's collective imagination. Another example of this is the scene in which Lux has a tryst with an anonymous man on the rooftop of the family home; again, this scene takes place at night time and Lux appears in shadow, her face covered by her blonde hair; we do not see the man that she is having sexual relations with either as he too is obscured by the dark lighting and shadow. The whole event is viewed through a telescope, which in cinema is often used to convey the imaginary.<sup>14</sup> In other words, we may well be in the realm of the false in this scene, but there is no way that we can tell definitively. As a film that deals with false recollections and the failings and

<sup>14</sup> Krzysztof Kieslowski uses this idea to tragic effect in *A Short Film About Love* (1988).

fallibility of (romantic) memory, *The Virgin Suicides* is akin to Deleuze's 'chronosign' or 'time-image' that either exists as 'sheets of the past' or 'peaks of the present' (2005: 95). In *The Virgin Suicides*, there is no way to extrapolate truth from falsity. Here, to use Deleuzian terminology, we are not in the realm of 'recollections but hallucinations' (2005: 109). Continually, the line that connects the past to the present through rational explanation is broken and the girls remain unfathomable.

### Liminality and Lines of Flight.

There would seem to be a correlation between the ambiguity of crystal, dream and memory images and the state of liminality. As we have seen, as the central phase of Van Gennepe's tripartite structure, liminality denotes a state of being 'betwixt and between' (Turner 1995: 95). Due to this lack of clear status, of being neither wholly one thing nor another, the personal attributes of the neophyte in liminality are nebulous. Indeed, Turner comments (1995: 95): 'liminality is frequently likened to death...to invisibility, to darkness, to bisexuality, to the wilderness', which suggests that the liminal entity cannot be configured or understood by conventional sets of binary oppositions. By their very nature, liminal personae slip: 'between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial' (Turner 1995: 95) and cannot, unlike the stereotype, be easily defined or understood. The concept of liminality can be expressed visually through memory, dream and crystal images; indeed, in *The Virgin Suicides* these ambiguous images visualise the liminal status of the Lisbon girls: as flesh and ghost and as real characters and fictional objects of desire.

While the girls hover between life and death, girlhood and womanhood, the boys hover between the past and the present and boyhood and adulthood. Deleuze (2005: 79) states that the crystal: 'always lives at the limit, it is itself the 'vanishing limit' between the immediate past which is already no longer and the immediate future which is not yet...mobile mirror which endlessly reflects perception in recollection'. The crystal has a natural capacity to show us how the past always informs and infiltrates the present, and how the boundaries between the past and the present, the actual and the virtual, the true and the false are permeable. It is this status of living both in the present and the past that affects the anonymous narrator of the film, and by extension, the group of males who remain haunted by their memories of the Lisbon girls.



Indeed, like Deleuze's description of the modern off-screen narrator who has:

'lost...omnipotence...[and] ceased to see everything...[and] has become questionable, uncertain, ambiguous' (2005: 240), the narrator in *The Virgin Suicides* cannot be certain of anything. What he remembers and narrates remains highly equivocal. This dual status of existing in both the present and the past and in-between two states is apparent in the 'acousmatic' nature of the narrator's speech; he is heard, but never seen and cannot be located definitively in space or time. The boys / men exist between the past and present moment, unable to forget the Lisbon girls and to cross definitively the boundary between childhood and adulthood: the conclusion of the film leaves the young boys standing outside the Lisbons' house as incapacitated viewers in the same place they occupied at the film's opening. These opening and closing sequences serve as visual reminders of the boys' arrested development, their inability to exist in the present, and their need to keep re-visiting the site of their loss, regardless of time's inexorable progression.

While the boys survive in a nebulous state between the past and present, the girls, as we have seen, exist as fictional objects of desire, both as real individuals who seem to be definite characters within the diegesis, but also as blank slates upon which the boys' fantasies and dreams are etched; in other words, they are less than the world-encompassing, meaning bearers that the boys make them into, but also more than the visual clichés that they are frequently seen to amount to. Yet, it is impossible to separate truth from fiction in this narrative; the 'reality' of the Lisbon girls is obfuscated by the film's imagery. Deleuze (2005: 68) writes of the proliferation of dream and fantasy images: '(w)hen virtual images proliferate like this, all together they absorb the entire actuality of the character, at the same time as the character is no more than one virtuality among others'. The 'virtual' images of the girls begin to exist for themselves and are as valid as other descriptions; yet, these images are consistently provisional and suggest the possibility of further interpretations and presentations. As an exploration of sheets of memory, the film's action is a form of abstraction from possible events. The representation of the Lisbon girls and the re-telling of their story is a creative activity, a process through which *fiction becomes reality*. The provisional nature of the narrative as presented by the boys, namely that this is one feasible version of events extracted from an array of possibilities, is continually impressed upon the viewer by the narrator who says: 'we would never be sure of the sequence of events, we argue about it still.' All that can be confirmed is that Cecilia was the first to go and Lux, as the source of light, the last. Although the fact that the boys / men remain obsessed with the past and seem unable to move on from it can be read as negative, their failure to become fully integrated into adult society (the narrator tells the viewers that, as adults, these men are happier with 'dreams'



than with 'wives') and thus to assume its designated roles also helps to open up new possibilities with positive repercussions. The boys refuse established norms and roles just as the girls do; however, whereas the boys' refusal of this prevents a smooth trajectory into adulthood, for the girls, this rejection of societal codes and expectations leads to death. Felicity Colman (2005: 367) has also remarked upon this aspect of Coppola's film; she states that the film is effective in its: 'acknowledgment of the dire effects of the constraints on identity though social mores and standards for teenage girls.' While the boys' inability to move on from the past is tragic, their discovery of 'otherness' also affords the possibility of becoming other and that of opening themselves up to new potentialities. However, the girls' becoming is closed off, the logical conclusion of which is self-annihilation.

Gus Van Sant's *Elephant* is based loosely on the events of the Columbine high school massacre that took place in 1999. Unlike Michael Moore's documentary investigation of the same subject in his film *Bowling for Columbine* (2002), Van Sant's film, most controversially, does not seek or offer any explanations for the murders.<sup>15</sup> On one level, it can be read as an indictment of an education system that re-fashions the individual in preparation for the adult world and also of adult authority (which, like in Coppola's *The Virgin Suicides*, seems anonymous and feckless). The world of *Elephant* is a bleak one in which people fail to connect meaningfully, something which Van Sant acknowledges: '(i)n daily life in America there is always discontinuity...if you wander around or even go to a cohesive interaction like a party everything is made up of non-sequiturs...if you want to make storytelling lifelike, you have to play by the rules of reality, which is that nothing is connecting, nothing is making sense.' (Said 2004:18) Alienation and disconnection within the everyday are themes that come through prominently in the film; for the greater part, Van Sant focuses on the quotidian, ritualised routines of the adolescent protagonists rather than the murders that conclude the film; he acknowledges the influence of American documentary filmmaker, Frederick Wiseman on his formal style and, like Wiseman's film *Hightschool* (1968), Van Sant reveals the 'horror' or latent violence of the hierarchical and divisive school system in which certain individuals suffer immeasurably. Even before violence erupts on screen, the viewer is made aware of the implicit brutality at play in the 'everyday'. The protagonists are quintessential examples of what Thomas Docherty (1996) calls 'the postmodern character': they are emptied out of all 'personal' characteristics and exist merely as drifting, rootless bodies on screen. It is no surprise that their interactions with one another are equally lifeless and hollow: ritualised exchanges are undertaken as a matter of course. Van Sant gives his protagonists names and the markings of archetypal characters; they have all the trappings of 'character', but no substance. Like Coppola's knowing reference to the cliché in *The Virgin Suicides*, the viewer is cast into a world of stereotypes in *Elephant*. As we shall see, Van Sant throws the viewer's relation to the film's characters into crisis by strategically refusing him/her the possibility of identification through his use of framing and choice of soundtrack. This strategy of detachment also has positive repercussions: the viewer loses the possibility of casting judgment on these characters. Instead, in a manner that is similar to the relationship Deleuze

---

<sup>15</sup> British director, Lynne Ramsay's forthcoming film *We Need To Talk About Kevin* (2011) will, apparently, take a similar approach to this phenomenon.

details between the viewer and modern cinema, we are required to see hear and think anew in relation to the film and, by extension, the historical event of 'Columbine'.

### *Figures of Crisis and The Horror of the Everyday .*

It is clear that the diegetic world in *Elephant* is one of crisis well before abject violence breaks through into the scenes at the end of the film. Van Sant's film can be said to be one of two halves in which the second act merely renders clear what is latent in the first. Like the young protagonists in Coppola's film, as adolescents, the characters in *Elephant* are inherently in crisis: bodies that are 'betwixt and between'. These characters are also figures of crisis in that they are *figures of dissolution*, beings heading towards death. Van Sant makes this obvious to the viewer through characterisation and through his choice of framing. The boundary between interior and exterior is dissolved in this cinematic world in that the characters are empty and 'absent' from themselves, while their environment is one laden with a sense of isolation and impending doom. The world of *Elephant* strongly echoes Deleuze's description of the breakdown of the movement-image, which as we have seen is characterised by the rise of stereotypes and rambling, wayward movement (2005: 3). Van Sant gives us 'archetypes' of the school experience who are representative of the social hierarchy at work in this world, but each of these characters is as isolated and 'emptied out' as the next one. There is a sense of parity amongst these characters not only because they are all equally unemotional, but also because Van Sant films them all in the same manner and, finally, they are all subjected to the same violence. Van Sant uses a number of formal strategies to create a cinematic world of crisis: he 'flattens' out the images by enhancing the 'separateness' of the background and foreground planes and creates a sense of isolation by not using rack focus; he uses the still frame, close-up and long-shot in order to isolate the figure in the frame and within the diegetic space; through use of the travelling shot, he places the camera as an 'anonymous' floating and observational eye within the diegetic world, while his use of oblique camera angles creates a sense of impending danger; he offsets the soundtrack against the visual image in order to disorient the viewer; finally, he uses natural or 'low-level' light and saturated colour to render the 'ordinary' strange and sinister.

Van Sant frames his young protagonists in such a way as to emphasise the inherently two-dimensional aspect of the cinematic image. By deliberately eschewing the rack focus technique, he keeps them isolated within the film frame either in the foreground or background of the



frame, while everything that surrounds them remains out of focus. In a few key close-up shots of the characters, Van Sant frames the protagonist in such a way as to collapse the foreground and background planes together so that the character seems immersed in his/her surroundings. Again, the overall effect of such a framing is a 'flat' quality. Additionally, Van Sant offsets the numerous dolly shots in the film with completely static close-up shots of his protagonists, which accentuates the 'flat' quality of these particular images. There are a cluster of shots centring on a character called John that contain all of these visual qualities; a notable example is the scene in which John is reprimanded by Mr Lewis, the school principal, for being late into school: Van Sant frames him in close-up so that his head seems compressed against the back of the chair on which he is reclining; John hardly moves and does not say anything at all; moreover, Van Sant holds the framing for over ten seconds before he cuts to a counter shot of Mr Lewis. A further example of such a framing is the static shot of John in an empty classroom, into which he has retreated in order to cry privately about his alcoholic father; Van Sant frames this scene from an overhead angle (a position that suggests the viewpoint of a security or surveillance camera); John occupies the centre foreground of the frame and, due to the position of the camera, the classroom setting seems diminutive in comparison to John's stature; Van Sant blurs the background plane of the shot so that John, who is wearing a bright yellow t-shirt, stands out strongly in the composition as a 'block' of colour; the camera does not move throughout, which heightens the viewer's sense of 'duration' when watching the scene.

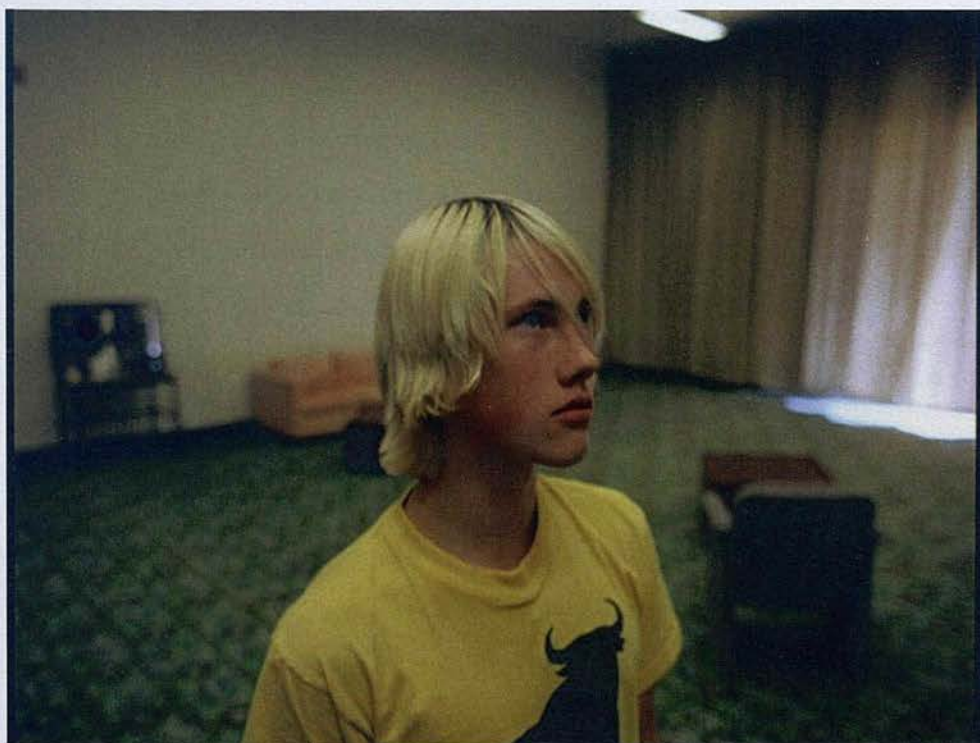


Figure 12: John tries to cry.

This formal strategy is inextricably linked to Van Sant's mode of characterisation in the film; the characters in *Elephant* cannot be said to 'be' anything as their inner qualities are never revealed to the viewer, something that is particularly apparent in the aforementioned scene in which John seems to mimic distress rather than really feel it. The protagonists in *Elephant* are neither characters with whom we can identify; nor are they agents who help to drive a narrative forward. They are bodies, quite literally, in transition - who wander aimlessly and, seemingly, endlessly. Deleuze writes of the modern cinematic protagonist that he/she is: 'objectively emptied...suffering less from the absence of an other than from the absence from [him/herself].' (2005: 9) Everything is already there to be seen and Van Sant suggests this visually through his deliberately 'flat' framing. Van Sant gives his protagonists all the 'trappings' of personality, but does not give them any fully-developed attributes: they have names and hold varying levels of social status (suggested through their clothing), but they do not seem to possess inner emotional qualities. In other words, they are more representative of various 'archetypes' of the school experience rather than cinematic characters in a classical sense. This kind of characterisation is explored by Thomas Docherty in his book 'Alterities' (1996); he writes, with specific reference to the influence of cinema on postmodern characterisation: 'under the influence of cinematic characterization and its immediacy of presentation of characters...there is no longer any depth to character. 'Character' in these terms does indeed disappear, for everything is already on display.' (Docherty 1996: 54) The effect of this in *Elephant* is to cast the viewer into a world of stereotypes, held together by a string of clichés: everything is at once grasped by the viewer, but nothing can really be appropriated critically. Van Sant continually draws the viewer's attention to things on a 'surface-level', which is discomforting precisely because he plays on what is left out of the image. His tight and precise framing helps to create a *mise en scène* of both control and evasion in which hidden forces are at work that will eventually rupture 'the surface' with abject violence.

Another way in which Van Sant hints at that which is not seen in the image, or that which lies at the periphery of the film frame, is through a strategy of de-framing or *décadrage*, a theory originally developed by Pascal Bonitzer. Bonitzer characterises *décadrage* through descriptions of two kinds of film shot: either one taken from an oblique angle, or one shot from a point of view that is unjustifiable within the narrative. Bogue (2003: 43) adds that such a shot must be '“read” or interpreted' within the context of the film, but given that the nature of such a shot is to be



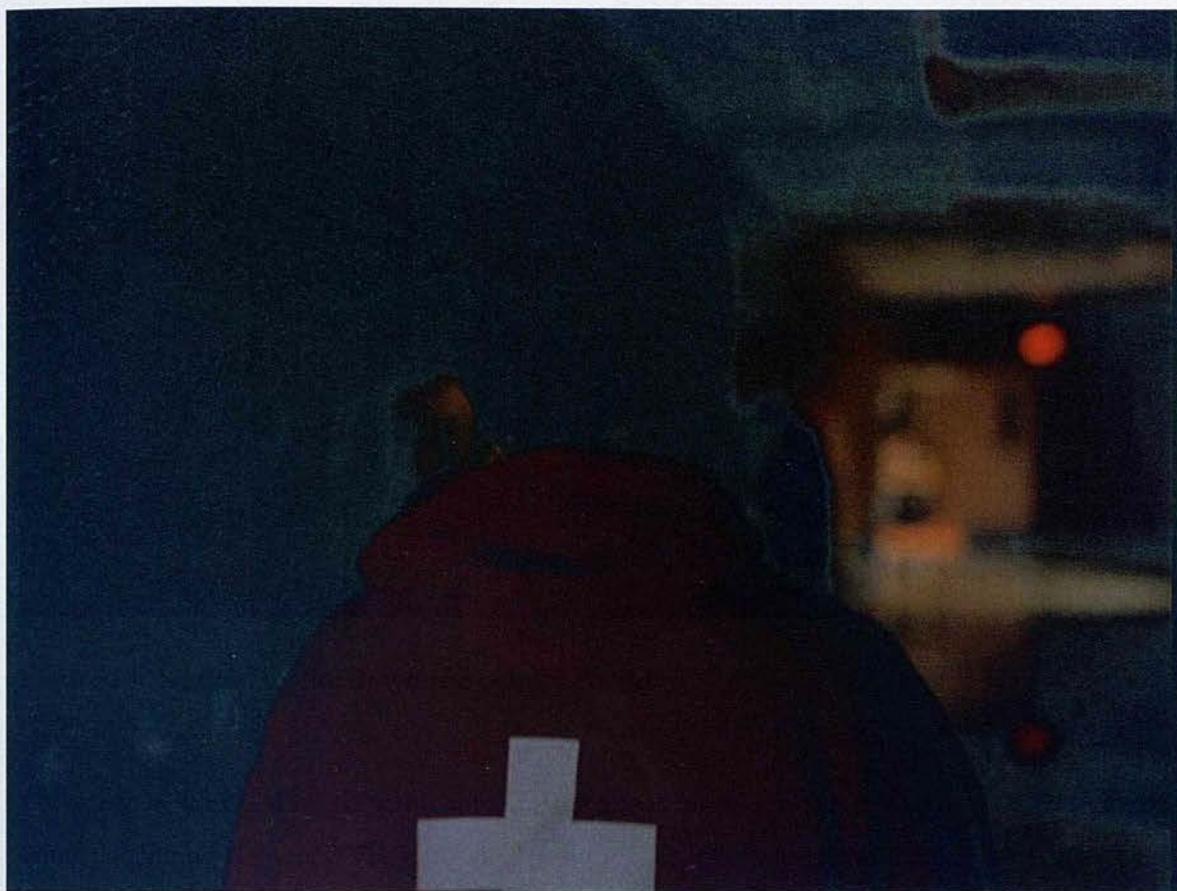
inscrutable, a reading of it can often engender feelings of displacement and anxiety within the cinematic viewer. Often a de-framing throws the viewer's gaze into crisis by de-centring it; Bonitzer writes: 'l'oeil habitué (éduqué) à centrer tout de suite, à aller au centre, ne trouve rien et reflue à la périphérie' (quoted and translated in Beugnet 2004: 31). The de-framed image plays on the notion of unassimilated off-screen space by showing images of characters either who seem about to disintegrate into a void, or who are surrounded by a vast space which seems to dwarf them and reduces them to vulnerable figures or potential victims. Beugnet (2004: 169) writes that *décadrage* plays with: 'that which lies at the borders of the frame, and the constant feeling that something is happening, or about to happen, just outside of or at the limits of the image...in long and medium shots, the human figure tends to remain off-centre and surrounded by large areas of emptiness. Closer up, it is often captured through intriguingly high or low angle shots, or sectioned by extreme close-ups that transform the body into that of prey.'<sup>16</sup> By surrounding his characters with vast open space or, alternatively, tightly framing the back of his protagonists' heads, Van Sant manufactures a sense of impending danger in the scenes leading up to the massacre. There are a number of features that render the scenes inside the school, although seemingly concerned with the prosaic and mundane, strange for the viewer. The camera's tight framing of the back of the protagonists' heads tends to suggest a pervasive but subtly harmful presence, as though the characters are consistently under surveillance and are oblivious to this while going about their everyday activities. Most disturbing is the film's soundtrack that offsets its visual track; Hildegaard Westerkamp's score entitled 'Beneath the Forest Floor' is an example of 'musique concrète', a form of composition that uses everyday sounds as part of its fabric. The soundtrack combines the familiar 'school yard' sounds of children playing, the practising of musical instruments, and sports field commotion with the more bizarre noises of train departure announcements, running water and bird noises, which are all distorted in their sound. These noises are not heard outside of the school, but appear immediately when any of the protagonists enter into the school through a door. Indeed, Van Sant plays with thresholds, entrances and exits, as well as the borders of the cinematic frame so as to suggest visually the liminal nature of his characters as well as their proximity to death. Two separate scenes in the film, both of which show a student walking from the games field into the school, demonstrate the effects of de-framing particularly well. Nathan and Michelle occupy different ends of the social spectrum: she is physically awkward and bullied by her peer group, while he is perhaps the quintessential 'jock' (tall, good-looking and athletic). Van Sant films them both in exactly the same way.

---

<sup>16</sup> Beugnet is writing with reference to Claire Denis's *Trouble Everyday* (2001).



The scene in which Nathan leaves the sports field and walks into the school to meet his girlfriend, Carrie, is rendered through a long tracking shot that is composed of two long and fluid takes. It starts with a static shot that is held for about a minute; bodies enter and leave the frame, which is often left empty, and Van Sant uses slow motion so as to bring out the physical nuances of different adolescents' deportments. In Deleuzian terms, this opening shot gives the viewer the 'gest' (2005: 148-49) of adolescence: the awkwardness and the ritualised physicality of games, such as touch football. Michelle enters the frame briefly and, in slow motion, we see her glance up at the clouded sky and then exit from the right of the frame; Nathan then enters the centre foreground of the film frame; Van Sant keeps the background of this shot out of focus so that Nathan appears to be surrounded by a mass of green wooded landscape and an open grey sky; he puts on his red life guard top, which makes him a predominant figure in the frame; the camera then tracks Nathan from behind as he walks into the school keeping him in the centre of the frame consistently; the soundtrack of Beethoven's 'Moonlight' Sonata in C Sharp Minor, which can be heard throughout this lengthy scene, blends with Westerkamp's score so that the minor modes of the sonata meld with the sounds of chiming bells and a church congregation chanting as Nathan passes between two trees and is obscured by grey shadow; the camera halts at this point and captures Nathan walking towards the school doors so that he seems increasingly like a figure that is merging and disappearing into a vanishing point. Van Sant then suddenly cuts to inside the school and frames the back of Nathan's head in a tight close-up and continues to track his walk through the school corridors; whereas in the exterior shot, Nathan is positioned within an encompassing landscape that seems to dwarf and absorb his body, in this interior shot, he is almost entirely obscured by darkness at certain moments or seems to be dissolved in a blinding white light; for example, as he turns the corner to walk up the staircase, his head merges with the black, seemingly porous space in the corridor so that only his red lifeguard top with a white cross marked out on it is visible; the other students in this space appear as mere shadows or outlines of bodies on the very periphery of the film frame; as Nathan walks up the stairs, the camera centres him and he walks towards a glass door; Nathan emerges out of the dark and heads towards the light. For a brief moment in this previous shot, Nathan's shoulders and the partition of the door frame form a crucifix shape; his body appears as a darker mass around which light floods in; moments later, the white cross on his lifeguard top appears in the frame again.



**Figure 13: Nathan walks down the school corridor.**

The scene in which Michelle walks across the gymnasium is somewhat shorter, but contains the same disquieting elements. The camera is positioned in a high angle on the opposite side of the gymnasium to where Michelle enters. Initially, she appears as a diminutive figure that is surrounded by a cavernous space; she is barely discernible amongst the shadow at the back of the hall; the camera remains completely still as she walks in a diagonal line across the gym; as she walks, she is alternately obscured by shadow and marked out by the shafts of light filtering in through the overhead windows; as she approaches the corner in which the camera is positioned, her body veers off to the left-hand side of the frame and seems to be absorbed into darkness.

Once again, throughout this scene, Westerkamp's score is a prominent feature; in the section of the score heard over this shot, Westerkamp samples the sounds of being submerged under water; these sounds are less sharp and distinct than the earlier section of the score that featured a church bell and a chanting congregation. When compared, these scenes demonstrate strongly the aforementioned effects of de-framing: the figure dwarfed by a vast, open space into which it is being absorbed, or the figure that seems to be sectioned off tightly within the frame and turned into a potential victim or piece of 'prey'; the use of the borders of the film frame that draws the



viewer's attention to what cannot be seen and, thus, that which lies at the limits of knowledge; finally, the camera that is positioned from an oblique angle that seems to connote an unseen, but all-seeing 'eye' or viewpoint that remains unjustified within the narrative. All of these elements are heightened by the 'eerie' or 'other-worldly' effect of the soundtrack which merges recognisable noises with the unknown and the inexorable quality of the travelling camera that seems to predict the characters' movements before they have made them (by cutting to another shot before the character in question occupies the frame).



**Figure 14: Michelle walks across the gymnasium.**

In both Coppola's and Van Sant's films, the liminal state of adolescence is inextricably bound up with death. The everyday conceals latent forces that control and bind an individual into a pre-given identity in preparation for adult life. In the same way that *The Virgin Suicides* can be read as a veiled criticism of patriarchy, *Elephant* can be read as an indictment of an educational system in which little room is made for individuals who do not comply with its rules. However, as we have seen *Elephant* is not really a 'moralistic' or 'message' film; rather, it is a film that centres on bodies in transition in which the passage from childhood into adulthood is allegorically mapped onto



the passage from life to death. Van Sant emphasises the fact that his protagonists are figures of metamorphosis through his use of the dolly shot; the characters in *Elephant* are, to borrow Turner's definition of the liminal subject, 'passengers' (1995:94) who are constantly travelling with no destination; likewise, their desultory movement reminds one of Deleuze's 'symptoms' of the break down of action in cinema in which purposive movement is replaced by loose or wayward movement. The form of the 'trip/ballad' (Deleuze 2005:3) is a description that is pertinent to *Elephant*, even once the violent killing spree starts, the characters (in particular one named Benny) seem more like rambling figures who are waiting to be killed. It is significant that the majority of *Elephant* is set in inherently liminal spaces such as corridors; similarly, the number of thresholds in the film seems important when one considers the characters' proximity to death. As we saw earlier, several notable features of the film during the moments in which the characters cross from the exterior to the interior of the school are the inclusion of Westerkamp's *concrète* score and the director's treatment of time. Van Sant uses slow motion during the scenes set inside the school so as to give these moments an added resonance and he also 'loops' time so that the viewer's sense of the chronological order of events in the film is thrown into crisis. In his study of literature 'The Dialogic Imagination', Mikhail Bakhtin notes that Fyodor Dostoevsky's novels centre on moments of crisis that always take place on thresholds; he outlines this as the 'chronotope [time/space]' of the 'threshold'.<sup>17</sup> He writes: 'in this chronotope, time is essentially instantaneous; it is as if it has no duration and falls out of the course of biographical time.' (Holquist 1981: 248) For Bakhtin, the chronotope designates the absolute 'connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships' (Holquist 1981: 84) as they are expressed in any given artistic medium. In the midst of this representation of the everyday, the threshold between the outside world and the school comes to represent the threshold between life and death in *Elephant*. By the film's conclusion, the vague sense of unease and distress that has been building up through the first half culminates in an atmosphere of fear and abject violence. The passing from life into death, is visually and sonically incorporated into the film on a formal level in its final scenes; the corridors become dark foreboding places through which the characters run, seemingly unable to find their way out; the lights in the corridor such as the red 'Exit' sign become sharply fluorescent, but they no longer serve the purpose of guiding people out of the building in an emergency; rather, they foreground how close the characters are to death. The corridors also become elongated, shadowy tunnels and the windows appear like bright, white lights at the end of them. The soundtrack of bird noises and running water again lends the final

---

<sup>17</sup> Although Bakhtin devoted his study on the chronotope solely to different genres of literature, he acknowledged that it could be used as a tool to assess images of 'space-time' in other creative media. Arguably, with its indexical relation to space and duration, film is a highly suitable medium for chronotopic assessment.

sector of the film an eerie or dream-like quality. The characters seem like disintegrating black figures within a landscape of destruction; they seem to gravitate towards the edges of the film frame, as though about to be absorbed into darkness. A comparison can be drawn between the dream-like qualities of this last section of the film and the state of falling into unconsciousness. The body of the film starts to disintegrate alongside those of the protagonists. Crisis may be very apparent in the image by this stage in the film, but Van Sant does not actually use any effects that he has not already employed in the film's first half. Murray Pomerance (in Seibel and Shary 2007: 215) notes: 'I take *Elephant* to be a statement, first and foremost, about the condition of experience in the contemporary high school: a depiction of that socially organized environment as, indeed, the perfect setting for such an atrocity, a setting designed to educate the spirits of American youth toward the disaffection and detachment we see so bloodily exemplified by Alex and Eric's actions.' The violence contained within the final part of the film, rather than being a 'shock' to the viewer, seems more like a logical outcome of the 'everyday' in this cinematic presentation.

### *The Crisis of Representation and The Thought of the Outside.*

The title '*Elephant*' refers to the Indian fable of 'The Blind Men and The Elephant', in which the men, feeling different parts of the elephant, believe they are holding particular items (such as a piece of string) and are never able to identify what is before them as a 'whole' being. Van Sant states that he wanted to make *Elephant* a response to those individuals who seemed content to lay the blame for the massacre on certain groups of people; in an interview at the time of the film's release, he stated: 'I guess the easy answer is, 'They're gay Nazis.' There were signs outside Columbine School saying 'Fags did this'... the film is a reaction to that reaction.' (Said 2004: 16) Rather than taking an unequivocally moral approach to this though, Van Sant insists that, like the men in the fable, whatever perspective we may take on this tragedy, it will not yield a satisfying answer to the problem; *Elephant* is made up of different sections, each of which take place from a different student's, or group of students', point of view, but these different sections only reveal similarities rather than differences. This is to say that each viewpoint is simply re-enforced through what has preceded it and what follows on from it. Van Sant includes scenes in which bullying, homosexuality and violent computer games feature in order to stress to the viewer that blaming the cause of a phenomenon such as 'Columbine' on these things is part and parcel of the problem in the first place and can never be the solution to it. As a cinematic experience, *Elephant* poses a problem in its very form that needs to be *thought* through, as well as be seen and

heard by the viewer. The problem the director faces (how to represent or screen the incomprehensible) is mirrored in the problem the viewer is given through the experience of seeing *Elephant* (how to think the unthought). Van Sant poses this problem to the viewer through two elements in the film: characterisation and, through separating the sound and visual tracks, by directing the viewer's thought towards, what Deleuze would term, the 'outside' of thought or its 'limit' (2005: 250). In other words, Van Sant throws the viewer's relation to the image into crisis so that he/she is forced to encounter the film cerebrally.

Murray Smith (1995), in his study on film characters and characterisation, states that there are three tropes that are used commonly to draw the spectator into the film experience; this is done, he argues, through identification with the main character in more 'classical' forms of film. Through processes of 'recognition, alignment and allegiance' (Smith 1995: 10), the audience comes to identify with the main character and his/her viewpoint onto the diegetic world and, by extension, the moral standpoint being espoused through it; often this viewpoint is likened to an omniscient eye that is therefore also all-knowing. Film scholars such as Christian Metz (1974) and Noel Burch (1981) have warned against the potentially pernicious effects of this process of identification. In *Elephant*, Van Sant refuses any possibility of this kind of recognition of the viewer within the film character; the film characters remain resolutely opaque throughout *Elephant*, while Van Sant's camera work continually takes up the vantage point of observation rather than identification. Indeed, there is only one point of view shot in the film: that of Alex, one of the killers, as he runs down a corridor shooting at his class mates. If Van Sant asks us to identify with anyone in the film, then, it is one of the killers: the character from whom we might separate ourselves in a more classical treatment of the subject. Having said this, the general viewpoint in the film is not that of a character, but of a kind of new vision that is linked to a new kind of 'thought'. In their article, 'Trompe le monde', Olivier Joyard and Jean-Marc Lalanne (2003: 29) note that the overall viewpoint of *Elephant* is indeterminate: 'le regard de Gus Van Sant est d'une impressionnante minutie: ni celui d'un flic, ni d'un prof, ni d'un élève, il est a priori absolument distant presque flottant.'<sup>18</sup> The camera work is disconnected from any definitive point of view, and yet it is suggestive of a disembodied, floating perspective; the striking angles and restless character of the camera work continually unsettle the viewer since, as we have seen, they often remain unmotivated or unexplained within the context of the narrative. The effect of this disables the viewer's perspective from that which he/she could judge



ordinarily. Deleuze remarks that in modern cinema, the characters alongside the viewers lose the ability to form judgments; he remarks that this can be most clearly seen in the films of Orson Welles, in particular in a film such as *The Trial* (1962) (2005:138-140). In modern cinema, 'it is the very possibility of judging which is called into question.' (Deleuze 2005: 134). For Deleuze, this eradication of judgment has affirmative possibilities because it allows us to recognise the inherently creative nature of 'truth' and it is for this reason that he casts Welles's character of the forger as the most positive of all cinematic characters (2005: 140). Likewise, *Elephant* does not offer the viewer a place from which he/she can form moral judgements; the characters are inscrutable 'forms' on screen, who, by their very nature, are evolving and mutating from one shot to the next. The experience of watching the film fractures 'the possibility' of judgement through its very form. As we have seen, Docherty notes the de-stabilising effects of what he calls 'the postmodern narrative' and character; he writes: 'postmodern narrative attacks the possibility of the reader [viewer] herself or himself becoming a fully enlightened subject...with full epistemological control over the fiction and its endlessly different or altered characters.' (Docherty 1996: 65) In refusing the possibility of identification to the viewer, in refusing to 'give' a moral message to the viewer and in disabling the viewer's ability to judge the characters and events in the film conventionally, Van Sant demands that his viewers engage with the film cerebrally by acknowledging the limitations of thought. As we have seen in the introduction to this thesis, for Deleuze, the awareness of the boundaries of conventional thought, the confrontation with the 'intolerable' (2005:164), gives to the cinematic viewer a very positive power: the thought of the outside.

According to Deleuze (2005: 164), within the modern cinema, the 'intolerable' is no longer linked to an extraordinary situation, but can now be found within 'the permanent state of daily banality.' As we have seen, this sense of something 'intolerable' within the everyday is precisely what arises within the cinema of the time-image; the modern protagonist finds himself increasingly in situations and landscapes to which and within which he does not know how to respond or to act; this is a state which frustrates action and causes the appearance of pure optical and sound images that cannot be assimilated into movement or a narrative trajectory: '(i)n everyday banality, the action-image and even the movement-image tend to disappear in favour of pure optical situations, but these reveal connections of a new type, which are no longer sensory-motor and which bring the emancipated senses into direct relation with time and thought.' (Deleuze 2005: 17) For Deleuze (2005: 19), a purely optical or sound situation: 'makes us grasp...something intolerable and unbearable.' As noted earlier, *Elephant* is a film that, for the

most part, is concerned with the everyday routines of average American adolescents. However, within the recognisable parameters of this setting, the film's *mise en scène* helps to bring more sinister and unsettling elements into play. The students wander aimlessly with no specific destination to reach, as though their journeying were undertaken for its own sake; they seem to be constantly in between two points and never strictly depart from or arrive anywhere. As we have seen, Deleuze (2005: 3) states that one of the symptoms of the collapse of the action-image regime is the prevalence of the: 'form of the trip / ballad' where the protagonist endlessly wanders, unable to find his/her coordinates in a desolate landscape.<sup>19</sup> In *Elephant*, although Van Sant shows the spectator the school corridors through long tracking shots, one is never sure how these disparate spaces form a whole. The corridors seem like a maze of endlessly winding paths, while the discrepancy between the sound and the visual track is evocative of the 'intolerable' kernel within the everyday and the 'unthinkable' in thought (Deleuze 2005: 164) of which Deleuze writes.



Figure 15: Elias.

---

<sup>19</sup> These desolate landscapes Deleuze calls 'any-space whatever' (2005: 5) which he contrasts with the recognisable cartography of the action-image regime where the protagonist could act with ease in order to link cause and effect. The modern protagonist finds himself/herself in unfamiliar settings and is unable to act; hence, the smooth spatial and narrative continuum that was a requisite of the classical cinema tends to disappear in the modern cinema.



For Deleuze, the purpose of the autonomous visual and sound track that arises in the modern cinema is to put the spectator into contact with thought. The viewer is made to confront the limitations of the thinking process and, through this confrontation, to acknowledge the unthought in thought; D.N Rodowick (2003: 192) affirms that in acknowledging the limits of thought, one magnifies the very power of thought to think beyond itself: '(t)o put one's faith in the impossibility or powerlessness of thought is not a flaw or disability; it is part of thinking, or the spiritual automaton that lives within thought.' In other words, by realising thought's limitations, one pushes the boundaries of thinking beyond established principles in order to create and think anew. In the case of *Elephant* the task or challenge of the filmmaker is how to present the inexplicable; by the concluding part of the film, it is quite clear that the usual explanations (neo-nazism, bullying, simulated violence) cannot suffice as reasons for the massacre, although they can serve as markings of the limitations of thought. Ultimately, it is the breaking apart of the visual and sound tracks that suggests a more powerful way of depicting the inexplicable; Deleuze (2005: 250) states that in the modern cinema: 'what speech utters is also the invisible that sight only sees through clairvoyance; and what sight sees is the unutterable uttered by speech.' As mentioned earlier, the soundtrack is comprised of bird noises, running water and train departure announcements, while the last part of the film shows bodies caught in between shadows or on the periphery of the film frame as though on the verge of dissolution. Fires burn in the school corridors and characters seem to wander around as though dispossessed of their own bodies and the increasingly surrealistic, high-contrast effect of the lighting scheme hints at the inexplicable. What was once 'real' becomes increasingly like an alternative reality.



Figure 16: An alternative reality.



*Elephant* is in no way a conventionally edited or scripted film and there is no specifically 'correct' way to read it. The idea that different editing techniques help to impose specific meanings or readings in the viewer's mind can be traced back to the cinematic theories of André Bazin in *What is Cinema?* (1967, 1971). Bazin, who praised directors such as Orson Welles and Roberto Rossellini for their predilection for deep-focus photography over montage, considered that: 'montage by its very nature rules out ambiguity of expression' where as: 'depth of focus brings the spectator into a relation with the image closer to that which he enjoys with reality...it implies...a more active mental attitude on the part of the spectator and a more positive contribution on his part to the action in process.' (Braudy and Cohen 2004: 50) For Bazin, montage simplifies things and rules out the possibility of multiple readings by imposing a certain meaning on the viewer. Importantly, conveying 'reality' on film, according to Bazin, has as much to do with engaging the viewer's 'mental' faculties as it has to do with using film's indexical relation to time and space. Deleuze locates the rise of the modern image within Italian neo-realist cinema of the 1940s (also admired by Bazin), a cinema that is defined through its use of the long-take, its characters in crisis who are often played by non-actors, its use of desolate landscapes as settings and, usually, the director's refusal to provide a 'tidy' conclusion.<sup>20</sup> Through its long-takes and observational viewpoint, *Elephant* is a film that does not rely on a great number of cuts for its overall effect; indeed, its lengthy tracking shots suggest a more meditative pace which allows time to be present in the scene as duration, rather than as artificially spliced segments. Furthermore, although time within individual scenes tends to retain its integrity, the cuts ensure that the spectator experiences time as a force that disrupts conventional modes of thinking. This is the power of time when it is not shackled to the requirements of cause and effect storytelling or chronology, which has intellectual and moral repercussions. In such a way, the style of editing in the film matches its deliberately open-ended conclusion. Xan Brooks (2004: 43) notes: 'Van Sant proceeds to run us through school corridors, past eavesdropped little dramas and around the rim of something vast and monstrous and finally unexplainable.' It is the 'unexplainable' that breaks apart the image and sound track in the end and gives the film its strange, otherworldly qualities. In *Elephant* the 'real' is 'de-realised' in order to create a more complex reality.

---

<sup>20</sup> Deleuze contrasted this type of cinema with the classical image which, surprisingly, he characterised through Eisenstein's montage of attractions, a form of editing that shocks the viewer into thinking a specific thought through the juxtaposition of disparate images. Arguably, these editing techniques had fallen out of favour during the post World War II period due to their association with propaganda or adoption by lesser filmmakers, a fact that Deleuze acknowledges (2005: 159): '(w)hat becomes of Hitchcock's suspense, Eisenstein's shock and Gance's sublimity when they are taken up by mediocre authors...when grandeur is no longer that of the composition, but a pure and simple inflation of the represented, there is no cerebral stimulation or birth of thought. It is rather a generalized shortcoming in author and viewers...But there is still more important reason: the mass-art...has degenerated into state propaganda and manipulation, into a kind of fascism which brought together Hitler and Hollywood.'

Deleuze states that in modern cinema the rational and coherent linkages that have held the diegetic world together in the classical cinema begin to seem false and break down, a situation that is often conveyed through the eyes of the central character. In a statement that seems to allude to both the cinema and the modern world, Deleuze writes: '(t)he modern fact is that we no longer believe in the events which happen to us, love, death, as if they only half concerned us. It is not we who make cinema but the world which looks to us like a bad film.' (Deleuze 2005: 166) In *Elephant* the process of endless wandering seemingly leads to nowhere and personal interaction is disjointed and conducted through archetypal modes of behaviour and communication. According to Deleuze, in the modern cinema, this disillusionment with the world is manifest in the image formally; sequences no longer join together coherently and are instead, linked irrationally, while the interstice gains a certain autonomy: 'sometimes, as in modern cinema, the cut has become the interstice, it is irrational and does not form part of either set, one of which has no more an end than the other has a beginning' (Deleuze 2005: 175). These sequences of images, then, do form a body, but are linked irrationally through: 'indiscernibility, inexplicability, undecidability, impossibility' (Rodowick 2003: 192). In the process of this, thought is put into contact with what is seemingly impossible to think and yet demands to be thought by the very realisation of its impossibility. Irrational linkage makes itself manifest in a number of ways according to Deleuze (2005: 165): 'the 'psychic' situation which replaces all sensory-motor situations; the perpetual break of the link with the world, the perpetual hole in appearances, embodied in false continuity; the grasping of the intolerable even in the everyday and insignificant'.<sup>21</sup> In *Elephant*, there is something 'intolerable' that is apparent in the everyday. The sequences that present daily adolescent routine may be seemingly innocuous, but the mise-en-scène of observation, the emotional inaccessibility of the characters, the unusual approach to the presentation of time, and the sombre mood of the music and slow, smooth camera movements intimate at a pernicious undertow and suggest clearly that this pro-filmic world is in crisis even before the outbreak of violence. The protagonists are not able to act conclusively within their environment; they are like somnambulists who are as unsure of their own emotions

---

<sup>21</sup> This irrational linkage has a significant impact on the viewer's pattern of thought: in the classical cinema, images were logically deduced from each other and formed a rational, coherent whole that reflected a believable world whereas the irrational linkages in the modern cinema force the spectator to acknowledge the obverse of rational thought that is: 'on the one hand the presence of an unthinkable in thought, which would be both its source and its barrier; on the other hand the presence to infinity of another thinker in the thinker, who shatters every monologue of the thinking self.' (Deleuze 2005: 162) The 'thought of the outside' can be inscribed in the image through unconventional or non-realistic editing such as jump-cuts, appearances of purely black or white screen as a void that separates images, or the discontinuity between the visual and sound tracks.



as they are of others' feelings and their rather passive response to the final massacre contributes to this characterisation. However, according to Deleuze, these imagistic markers also signal a new way of thinking and seeing for the cinematic viewer. In *Elephant*, this new vision and thought brings us back to our own reality, but in such a way that we experience it anew.



**Figure 17: Violence breaks through into the image.**

In *Elephant*, Van Sant creates an experience for the viewer that forces him/her to re-examine the everyday. In this cinematic world, 'evil' is not 'other' because it is part of daily reality. By focusing on quotidian reality at a 'surface' level, Van Sant draws the viewer's attention towards the banality of evil: as a part of the fabric of our social and cultural world. By refusing to provide a rational explanation or motivation for the killings, Van Sant prevents us from eschewing the event of 'Columbine' from our collective memory. This is to say that, 'Columbine' cannot be contained or explained and therefore forgotten. Indeed, by resolutely examining social interactions on a 'surface' level and matching this within his formal approach, Van Sant actually complexifies 'Columbine' by hinting at the void which lies at the centre of this cinematic representation. This acknowledgment of the void, draws the viewer's attention back to our own world and evil as a part of it. Writing with reference to recent French films, Martine Beugnet has noted a similar focus on 'the void' at the heart of representations of evil within the ordinary, in particular a refusal to explain the actions of the criminal figure through motivation, which forces us back upon the everyday; she writes: 'it is this present-*absence*, which signals the increasing presence of a 'lack' in the cinematic representation of evil, the criminal figure, and the masking



of this void by processed images, pre-existing roles, expressions and attitudes, that arguably give the films their postmodern feel. Yet, again, it is an absence that calls for the questioning of a wider context.’ (Beugnet in Ezra 2000: 204) In *Elephant*, the cinematic world is one that reflects and confronts our ways of interacting with and thinking about our own modern world. By making banality sinister and strange, *Elephant* forces us to re-establish a link with our quotidian reality that has been broken due to our need to distance ourselves from, and thus, morally ‘explain away’, any tragic event such as Columbine. Arguably, if the film leaves us with a message, it is that it is not until we re-unite ourselves with *this* world and recognise it as our own that we can really begin the infinite process of trying to understand it.<sup>22</sup>

---

<sup>22</sup> Part of this final paragraph appears in this author’s article ‘Realism and Gus Van Sant’s *Elephant*’ (In Nagib 2009: 85-96). It appears here with permission from Palgrave Press.

**Death:** *Dead Man* (1994), *Last Days* (2004).

Jim Jarmusch's *Dead Man* and Gus Van Sant's *Last Days* centre on characters who are dying or 'dissolving'. In both of these films, the passage from life to death is recast as a process of *becoming* enabled through the state of liminality. These characters (both of whom are named 'Blake') are in crisis, but this 'crisis' is manifest in their very bodies. Again, what we have here are 'figures' of crisis; indeed, these characters function more like ciphers on screen, through which we see the processes of *becoming* and metamorphosis occur. Ultimately, these cinematic representations of death / dissolution are positive ones: in both films the concept of 'transcendence' is subverted so that dying or decaying body is *immanent* within the world. Death, then, is not an end in itself, it is merely another stage that leads to further transformation and *becoming-other*. Matching this 'crisis of the body' is the generic world into which the cinematic viewer is thrown by both directors. By using the Western and the Biopic (and 'acid' film) respectively, Jarmusch and Van Sant offer the viewer a cinematic world of crisis. Yet the purpose of utilising these cinematic frameworks for both directors is to push the image beyond what is ordinarily shown. In Deleuzian terms, both directors explore the 'limits' of generic images in order to create something *beyond* the cliché and to force the viewer into seeing and thinking anew (Deleuze 2005: 178). Jarmusch in particular counteracts the vision of 'truth' that the Western has historically perpetuated by calling generic images into question and opening them out onto purely optical visions. Jarmusch uses what Deleuze (2005: 122) would term the 'powers of the false' (a concept he develops from his reading of Nietzsche) to deconstruct the Western and its particular version of 'truth'.



### *Dead Man* (1994).

*Dead Man* is set in America during the 1870s. It tells the tale of William Blake, a white, middle-class accountant from Cleveland, Ohio, who travels westward to the fictional town of Machine in order to take up a financial post in Dickinson Metal Works. When he arrives at his destination, he finds that the job he was promised has already been filled. Alone (Blake has recently been orphaned and his fiancée 'changed her mind') and destitute (he spends his last few coins on a tiny bottle of whiskey) in a strange town, he befriends an ex-prostitute named Thel and accompanies her back to her room. During a scene of implied intimacy between Blake and Thel, her former lover, Charlie (Dickinson's son), bursts in and tries to shoot Blake, but accidentally kills Thel as she tries to shield Blake from the bullet. Despite Thel's courageous manoeuvre, the bullet passes through her and lodges deeply in Blake's chest next to his heart, thus wounding him fatally. Blake shoots clumsily at Charlie and kills him on his third attempt. After this, he falls backwards out of Thel's bedroom window and escapes from Machine on Dickinson's treasured pinto horse. Some time later, Blake is found in the forest by Nobody, a plains American Indian of mixed blood and an outcast from his own tribe, who tries to remove the bullet from Blake's chest to no avail.<sup>23</sup> Nobody pronounces Blake to be a dead man and, upon discovering his name, takes him to be the eponymous English visionary poet. Nobody decides to guide Blake back to the land of the spirits from which he came; from this point onwards, the film becomes a spiritual quest. Meanwhile, Dickinson has discovered the murders of Charlie and Thel and has named Blake as the assailant. He sends three nefarious bounty hunters out to find Blake in exchange for a substantial reward. In spite of promising the three bounty hunters 'exclusivity' on Blake's life, he also employs two marshals to find him and distributes an abundance of posters that describe Blake as a very dangerous and wanted man.

By setting his film within a particular period of history (the late nineteenth century) and in a specific place (the place of the first European settlers on the frontier), Jarmusch overtly places his film within the Western genre. He cements this relationship through his use of a number of traditional narrative elements, (the arrival of a stranger in a frontier town, the journey from east to west, the fractious relationship between a white man and a Native American Indian, the

---

<sup>23</sup> By naming the Native American Indian character in his film 'Nobody', Jarmusch is alluding to Tonino Valerii's film *My Name is Nobody* (1973) in which the main protagonist is aided by a fellow wanderer who is also called Nobody. Critics, such as Gregg Rickman in his article 'The Western Under Erasure: *Dead Man*' (in Kites and Rickman 1999: 381-401) have also noted the link between the Western genre and Homer's 'Odyssey' in which Ulysses outwits the Cyclops by telling him that his name is 'Nobody'.

presence of industrialisation as a sign of progress) and a specific iconography (the railroad, stagecoaches, horses, wild landscape, Winchester rifles, bounty hunters). However, although these rudiments of the genre are used, they are only brought into play in order to be subverted as part of Jarmusch's over-arching project – to deconstruct the Western genre and, in the process, to hint at the history that has been excluded from official, hegemonic versions of the founding of America. Jarmusch comments: '(i)n Hollywood Westerns...history was mythologised to accommodate some kind of moral code.' (Rosenbaum 2000: 47) In revealing the fabricated nature of a number of the Western's tropes, Jarmusch de-mythologises the hackneyed images so associated with the Western. He does this by establishing the film's true theme as mortality, which is seen with a potency that breaks through the clichéd image. This is to say that what we are presented with on screen is a rite of passage: the main protagonist journeys into the wilderness and, through the experience of liminality, *becomes-other* and eventually disintegrates. Alongside this literal exploration of a life-crisis, Jarmusch deconstructs central tenets of the Western through this representation of liminality. Justus Nieland (2001: 176), with reference to Deleuze's notion of the 'seer', notes: 'by sifting through the representational archives of the Western, eschewing comfortable clichés, and demythologising narratives of Western progress and civilisation (and the racist ideologies that underwrite them), Jarmusch offers us a series of radically de-metaphorised images of feral industrial modernity and violent aggression.' In other words, it is death and destruction that Jarmusch brings to the fore over notions of progress and civilisation. In this context, it is important that the central protagonist is not only mistaken for the English 'visionary' poet William Blake, but also that the latter part of the film focuses on the quest for hallucinogenic vision. The importance of this new way of seeing the world for the protagonist, the director and, by extension, the viewer, is reminiscent of Deleuze's words in *Cinema-2*: '(t)here is no knowing how far a real image may lead: the importance of becoming a visionary or seer.' (2005: 20) It is this quest for vision and the breakdown of the protagonist's sensory-motor capacities that enables the restoration of 'lost parts' to the image; additionally, 'voids' (Deleuze 2005: 20) also appear in these sequences that break apart the narrative and, in the process, help to reveal the hidden history that underlies any official version.

By using the Western as a genre 'in crisis', Jarmusch counteracts the particular version of history it has perpetuated and come to be associated with. In its more traditional form, the Western is a genre that is associated with action, in particular purposive violent action that is rendered 'meaningful' through narrative context; indeed, a coherent narrative plays a crucial part in justifying the 'actions' of the protagonists as it helps to sustain the particular vision of truth being

promoted within the film. When this logic that enchains generic images together fails, the 'grand narrative' that the film upholds is thrown into crisis. Writing with reference to Deleuze's assessment of the movement-image, D.N Rodowick (2009: 107) notes that: 'these rational connections [between the images] also have an ethical dimension - they are expressive of a will to truth. They express belief in the possibility and coherence of a complete and truthful representation of the world in images' It is precisely the possibility of a 'complete and truthful representation' that is called into question in a cinema of the time-image. Rodowick (2009: 108) notes further that a cinema of the time-image counteracts 'truth' through its will to falsehood; he writes: '(i)f the ethical stance of the cinematic movement-image is expressive of a will to truth, then that of the direct image of time is given in powers of the false that challenge the coherence and unity of organic representation.' As we shall see, *Dead Man* is a film that formally and ideologically has much in common with a Deleuzian cinema of time as it calls into question not only the generic images of the Western, but also the version of 'truth' it has, in its more traditional form, upheld. By eschewing any possibility of a 'truthful' vision, Jarmusch affirms the potentiality of new and more challenging representations of history in film.

### *The Crisis of the Western Genre.*

Since its inception during the early days of cinema, the Western has become a cultural vehicle through which America relates and filters its own history; Philip French (2005: 13) notes in his book on the genre that: 'one of the things the Western is always about is America rewriting and reinterpreting her own past, however honestly or dishonestly it may be done.' Central themes of the genre are the overcoming of the frontier and appropriation of the wilderness in the name of civilisation and progress and the approbation of violence when confronted with a savagery that will not succumb to 'civilising' and moralising forces. Alongside its recognisable iconography - e.g., the frontier town, the awe-inspiring and barren landscape, the stagecoach, the homestead and pioneering family, the Stetson gun or Winchester rifle, the Cowboy and the Indian - the Western has also perpetrated its own harmful ideology: the promotion of the white, European settler as an enlightened agent pitted against the savage and brutal Native American Indian who resists and prevents progress. The division between society (associated with the small frontier town) and savagery (associated with nature) in the Western has helped to sanction its excessive



and, at times, wanton use of violence. In conjunction with this, Melinda Szaloky (Walker 2001: 48) notes: '(b)ecause this wild nature (which includes the natives) resists civilising efforts of the enterprising brave, it must be tamed and transformed *by force*. In this manner, the noble causes of progression and civilisation provide an unassailable rationale for the Western's exuberant violence legitimating American expansionism, first on the American continent and later abroad.' The traditional or classical Western, in a number of ways, sanctions the initiation of force against an 'other' by leaving its own set of ideas largely unquestioned.

However, as a genre that purports to represent American history and values, the Western has had to adapt to changing political and cultural climates; this was particularly evident during the late 1960s and early 1970s when events such as the Vietnam War and the Watergate scandal contributed to an increasingly fractious atmosphere within America. Furthermore, the growing cultural awareness of the civil rights movement meant that the simple dichotomy upheld in the classical Western of white man as 'good' versus the Native American as 'uncivilised' was no longer tenable. Hoberman (Kitses and Rickman 1999: 90) notes: '(t)he revelation of American atrocities in Vietnam only reinforced the argument that the slaughter of Native Americans was less the distortion than the essence of white man's wars.' Although some adjustment was made within the genre to accommodate more positive representations of Native Americans and to provide stronger dramatic roles for women (Arthur Penn's *Little Big Man* (1970) and Clint Eastwood's *The Outlaw Josey Wales* (1976)) and although various subversive forms of the genre appeared (Robert Altman's *McCabe & Mrs. Miller* (1971) and Robert Downey's *Greaser's Palace* (1972)), the general popularity of the genre started to decline, which suggested that a critical approach was not naturally within its scope. Despite attempts to 're-vision' and re-examine the Western and its partnering ideology, it was felt that the portrait of the Native American in particular was still unsatisfactory; the blood-thirsty and primitive savage of the traditional Western was mostly replaced with the equally spurious characterisation of a noble man espousing aphoristic wisdom. Michael Hilger (2002: 1) comments that these portraits forced: 'the Native American characters into a circle where they are ultimately too bad or too good to be believable fictional characters – a circle in which they also are only vehicles for contrast to white heroes of the Westerns and the values of white culture.' Tellingly, it was only during the 1970s that the practice of casting white actors as Native Americans in films slowly started to change despite the fact that the appearance of white actors in 'black-face' had been deemed wholly inappropriate well before this shift. Any adjustment that the Western has made to the

contemporary world and its values has often seemed tokenistic, while its pervasive philosophy, despite the making of a number of 'revisionist' versions of the genre, has remained mostly intact.

The Western, then, in its classical form, is a genre in crisis, something that has prompted some critics to believe that it is obsolete. Jim Kitses (Kitses and Rickman 1999: 16) notes that: 'the Western no longer occupies a central place. Indeed, as post-modern theory insists, and our daily experience often reminds us, there no longer are centralities, privileged myths or canonical authorities.' However, recently Ang Lee and Andrew Dominik have used the genre as an elegiac and metaphorical backdrop for narratives of isolation and longing in *Brokeback Mountain* (2005) and *The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford* (2007). It is perhaps significant that these films, which in their own ways are original takes on the Western genre, were made by Chinese and Australian directors respectively, whereas a film such as *3:10 to Yuma* (2007), by American director James Mangold, is a straight re-make of a film from 1957 made by Delmer Daves. Films such as PT Anderson's *There Will Be Blood* (2008) and The Coen Brothers' *No Country for Old Men* (2008) are arguably variations on the Western genre as the former centres on the violent origins of America and the latter is set in a quasi 'outback' or liminal zone, but they cannot be said to be Westerns in the strictest sense. Indeed, while these two films take a veiled critical stance to contemporary America and the war in Iraq, the Western genre in its purest form has not been used as the subversive tool that it could be. This resurgence of interest in the Western, albeit short-lived, as a genre that propounds the 'pioneering frontier' spirit of America at the height of the Bush era and the war in Iraq, is telling in this respect.<sup>24</sup> Notable examples of classical Westerns that emerged at this time are: Kevin Costner's *Open Range* (2003), Ron Howard's *The Missing* (2003), Jean-Claude La Marre's *Gang of Roses* (2003), Simon Wincer's *Monte Walsh* (2003), Joe Johnston's *Hidalgo* (2004) and John Lee Hancock's *The Alamo* (2004).<sup>25</sup> Despite the overall decline in its popularity, the Western's ability to function as a mouthpiece for the American ideology of civilisation still stands. Perhaps for this reason alone, *Dead Man* remains an important film in the Western canon because few filmmakers have sought to use the genre as a vessel for exploration of contemporary America and its values.<sup>26</sup> Writing in 1920, Frederick Jackson Turner (2008: 2) noted the inseparability of existence on the frontier from the American

---

<sup>24</sup> Critical reaction to Kelly Reichardt's *Meek's Cutoff* (2010), which explores the relationship between a group of white 'settlers' and a Native American within a liminal zone, has been very positive. This is especially interesting given the current dearth within the genre.

<sup>25</sup> For a more extensive list see: <[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_Western\\_films:\\_2000s](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Western_films:_2000s)> [accessed 13/3/2010].

<sup>26</sup> HBO's recent television series *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* (2007) directed by French Canadian filmmaker Yves Simoneau addresses the discrepancy between 'official' and 'unwritten' history. Formally, the series is made in a very conservative style though.



spirit: '(t)his perennial rebirth, this fluidity of American life, this expansion westward with its new opportunities, [this] continuous touch with the simplicity of primitive society, furnish the forces dominating the American character.' It is precisely this aspect of the genre that appealed to Jarmusch: '(t)he "Western" as a genre is very open to metaphor, and has deep roots in classical narrative forms...the openness of the form, and its inseparable connection to "America" in the broadest sense, attracted me to it. I have to admit though, that...the genre was really only used as a point of departure.' (Jarmusch: 1996) The fact that Jarmusch uses the Western genre as a 'departure' point is significant. He adopts the framework of the Western precisely because these pre-conceived notions about the genre are useful to his deconstructive project, and the final result is all the more disruptive for the spectator because of the assumptions he/she may bring to the film. Deleuze's (2005: 178) description of Jean-Luc Godard's use of genre seems apposite when one considers that Jarmusch's aim is to break through the hackneyed images and notions associated with the genre: '(t)his reflective status of genre has important consequences: instead of genre subsuming images which naturally belong to it, it constitutes the limit of images which do not belong to it but are reflected in it.' Post-modern theory reminds us that every hegemonic version of history is predicated on a structure of binary opposition in which the excluded term necessarily infiltrates the meaning of the accepted term. In *Dead Man*, the usual images associated with the Western are seen to break down; additionally, those images that do not strictly 'belong' to the genre, but are 'reflected in it' and constitute its main body, proliferate as purely visual and sonic moments that, as we shall see, challenge and renew the viewer's thought processes.

### *The Crisis of Action.*

The Western genre is one that is typically associated with action. Usually, at the centre of the narrative, is a male figure who always knows how to act, can shoot with deadly accuracy and inspires confidence in the viewer with this attitude. He appears as a morally unambiguous character as the narrative is set up so as to convey the 'correctness' of his actions within the diegesis. French's (2005: 30) delineation of the archetypal Western hero is telling: 'the hero is the embodiment of good. He is upright, clean-living, sharp-shooting, a white Anglo-Saxon Protestant who respects the law...he dresses smartly in white clothes and rides a white horse...he uses bullets and words with equal care...he always wins.' However, in *Dead Man*, the well-worked principles of the Western narrative and characterisation have broken down to the extent that they either no longer serve any purpose, or they do not re-confirm the ideals that they



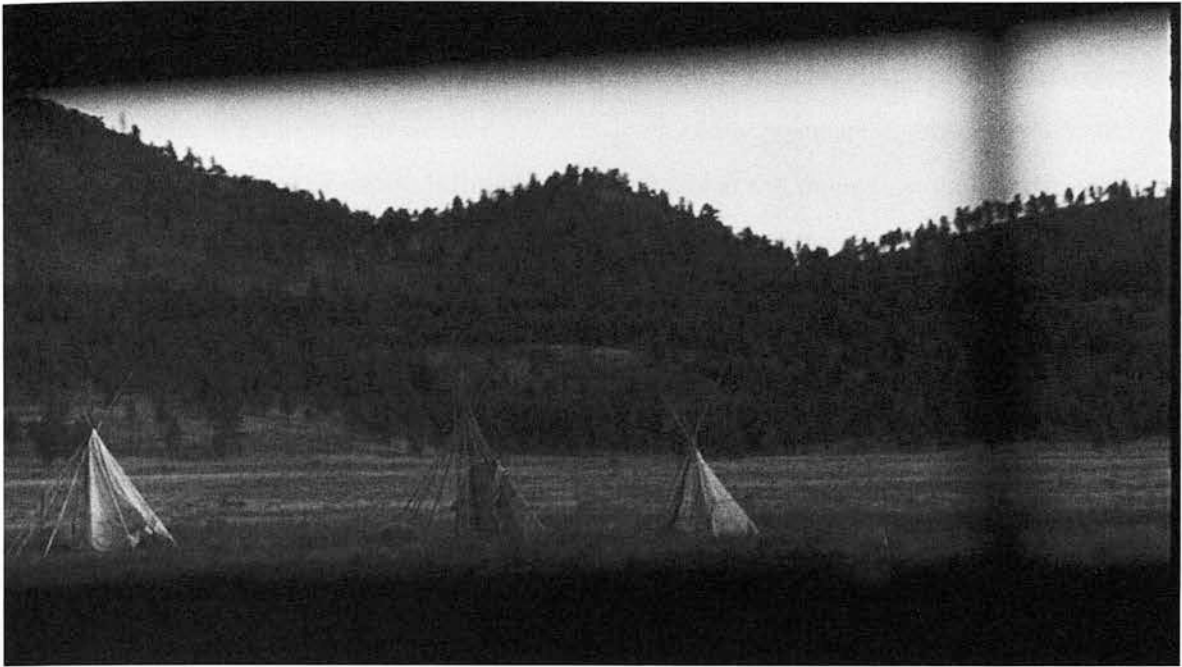
are supposed to. Indeed, at the heart of *Dead Man* is a 'foppish' character who does not initially know how to handle a gun and is too ambiguous to be held up as a person of moral rectitude. Thus, although Jarmusch adopts many of the recognisable scenarios from what Justus Nieland (2001: 171) calls 'The Western Archive', he does so in a subversive manner in order to expose their specious nature. Additionally, the crisis of action and ideology of the Western genre is reminiscent of Deleuze's description of the breakdown of the action-image, which, as we have seen, is: 'the form of the trip / ballad, the multiplication of clichés, the events that hardly concern those they happen to, in short the slackening of the sensory-motor connections.' (2005: 3)

That *Dead Man* is a Western, to use Gregg Rickman's term, 'under erasure' (Kitses and Rickman 1999: 381), is clear from the beginning of the film. Rickman, taking his cue from Derrida's concept of 'erasure', states that Jarmusch uses the established tenets of the Western genre in order to efface them and reveal their inherent provisional nature or dependency on history's unwritten 'other'.<sup>27</sup> He writes: 'the film "erases", inverts, and upends all the various western conventions...its narrative forms a series of cancelling operations: the fates of all the characters and the West are all equally null.' (Kitses and Rickman 1999: 399) The well-noted opening shot of *Dead Man* is a close-up of a train wheel accompanied by the jarring sound of a single guitar chord. Not only is this unusual because it rejects the traditional use of an establishing shot that familiarises the viewer with the diegetic setting, but also because Jarmusch deliberately counteracts the notion of the railroad as a symbol of progress by replacing it with a vision of a polluting and noisy train, inside of which are increasingly barbaric-looking passengers. From the outset, the viewer is disoriented and subjected to a long opening sequence that does not so much extol the virtues of the white Anglo-Saxon settler as associate this way of life with disorder, destruction and death. Throughout this opening eight-minute sequence, there is little or no dialogue at all and the 'hero' is a foppishly-dressed, unassuming man who drifts in and out of sleep. This is the first hint that the central character has more in common with Deleuze's 'seer' than with the typical agent of Western cinematic tradition. Blake merely stares at his increasingly

---

<sup>27</sup> Derrida (1967) extends Martin Heidegger's strategy of crossing out the word 'Being' to all language. Heidegger in his analysis of 'being' states that 'being' precedes all meaning and language; therefore the very term 'being' is an inherently inadequate form through which the concept can be analysed and expressed. However, Heidegger acknowledges that there is no alternative outside of this inadequate signification. Thus, Heidegger tends to write ~~Being~~; in doing so, he maintains both the word and its annulment within the text. Developing this, Derrida states that all language is unstable because meaning is endlessly deferred. This is to say that any given signifier gains its meaning through its 'difference' from another signifier, a process that in itself is unending. Meaning, then, can never be fixed; at best, it is always provisional and unstable. Likewise, any 'grand narrative', such as the Western, is defined against 'history's other', although the existence of 'the other' is denied in order to maintain a particular version of events as 'true'.

threatening-looking fellow passengers and his face, which is completely white and blank, registers nothing overtly 'readable' for the spectator. When we see through Blake's eyes out of the train window, it is to view a progressively barren landscape that has the traces of destruction all over it. We may be presented with typical iconography of the Western such as an Indian's tent or a stagecoach, but these items are presented to the viewer as burnt remains. Deleuze (2005: 5) describes the empty landscapes that proliferate in post-war cinema as: 'dehumanized...emptied spaces that might be seen as having absorbed characters and actions, retaining only a geophysical, abstract inventory of them.' Here, the scene one might expect to be reminiscent of more traditional settings of the Western has been emptied of its contents. It no longer contains people in recognisable settings doing comprehensible things, while the images that are present and possibly representative of the genre are as empty and resonant of death as the landscape is. The changes in the scenery that are shown intermittently in between the scenes set within the train's interior, also expose the fact that 'civilisation' has not yet reached these parts. Towns give way to forests and finally to open, dust-filled landscapes where it is difficult to locate anything definitively. These scenes are suggestive of the protagonist's own loss of direction later on in the film and the subsequent replacement of action with vision. As we have seen, Deleuze notes that action scenarios take place in recognisable settings where it is easy to find one's coordinates, but the purely optical and sound scenarios which he describes as the starting point for the cinema of time take place within barren landscapes, like those which we find in the opening scenes of *Dead Man*. Deleuze writes of the modern setting: '(t)he space of a sensory-motor situation is a setting which is already specified and presupposes an action which discloses it...but a purely optical or sound situation becomes established in what we might call "any-space-whatever", whether disconnected, or emptied.' (2005: 5) These purely optical and sound situations, which the protagonist sees but to which he cannot react, are able to break through the hackneyed scenarios of the action-image cinema and reveal images that are divested of ideological restraints. As we have seen, the deconstruction of generic imagery is precisely Jarmusch's project in *Dead Man*, and this early modification of the traditional opening scenario of the Western film is indicative of how the film will progress.



**Figure 18: The destruction of the Western landscape.**

Blake's arrival in Machine is presented through a long tracking shot, which shows him walking slowly and anxiously down the town's main street, and several point of view shots that show the extent of the destruction man has wrought on the landscape. Traditionally, the frontier town is poised between civilisation and the chaotic wilderness. The newly built town represents progress and the overcoming of the frontier as the town slowly expands. Existing on the threshold between order and disorder, civilisation and savagery, the frontier town is also continually vulnerable and open to attack as seen in films such as John Ford's *The Searchers* (1956). The town of Machine, however, is seen to be a dark, dank and messy place that is overtaking the landscape to deleterious effect. Even its name connotes the imperious force of industrialisation. The town itself is so overwhelming and sprawling that there seems to be no chance of it being wiped out or attacked. The scene of Blake's arrival in Machine reveals a town that is inanimate and redolent with death, and where the inhabitants are like statues and merely stare menacingly at a newcomer. Jarmusch references the 'Acid' and 'Spaghetti' forms of the Western by focusing on death and decay here; carcasses of dead animals and bones of various sorts abound in this scene, which lends it a putrid air. Additionally, Blake's point of view reveals a level of obscenity that is not common in the classical American Western. As a genre that usually seeks to cover over the more brutal aspects of frontier life, the Western, through its narrative and form, sanctions behaviour that might be seen as excessive in the name of progress and law-enforcement. However, Jarmusch counteracts this bowdlerisation by including excessive elements in this



scene; images of horses urinating in the street and the infamous sequence of a woman forced to perform fellatio at gun-point immediately strike the viewer as deliberately provocative elements in the narrative. With its emphasis on the grotesque-looking population, obscenity and the overwhelming presence of death, Jarmusch already hints at the manner in which, throughout the film, he will replace the Western's traditional east to west journey as a symbol of progress with that of the trip towards death and dissolution. By drawing on previous cinematic portraits such as Alejandro Jodorowsky's *El Topo* (1970) and Altman's *McCabe & Mrs Miller* (1971) that focus on the decay of a Western town, Jarmusch deliberately counteracts the Western in its more traditional narrative form as the birth of a nation. In other words, *Dead Man* is about the death of America and not its birth. Jonathan Rosenbaum (2000: 21), in his extended study of the film, notes the importance of this visual obsession with death for the director's project: '(i)f America...is haunted by the genocide that presided over its conquest, one of the things that makes *Dead Man* a haunted film is a sense of this enormity crawling around its edges, informing every moment and every gesture, without ever quite taking centre stage.' The first shot of the Dickinson metal work factory re-affirms the theme of death and decay; it is a low-angled one that is not suggestive of institutional power, but rather of the imposition this certain mark of 'progress' can make on the landscape. The smoke that billows out of its chimney seems overwhelmingly toxic.



Figure 19: Death and decay in the Western town.

One of the most striking aspects of the breakdown of action in *Dead Man* is Jarmusch's treatment of violence. Normally, the hero of the Western is a strong masculine figure who is able to defend himself and, if necessary shoot to kill with accuracy. From the outset of the film, it is clear that Blake is not this familiar hero. A great deal of the film's humour in the opening sequences derives from the juxtaposition of Blake with Machine and its inhabitants. He is dressed in a tartan suit with a smart hat and wears a pair of glasses; his civilised demeanour is as out of keeping with the behaviour of the inhabitants of Machine as his cordial manners are with the metal work employees. Kathleen Karlyn (2007: 7) notes that: '*Dead Man's* portrayal of an emasculated white hero, a coward and a poor shot to boot, builds upon previous images of sexual vagueness portrayed by Depp as angora sweater-wearing Ed Wood.' It is Blake's attitude towards violence that marks him out most clearly as an outsider. He is visibly shaken by the train passengers who shoot at buffalo out of the wagon windows and his question to Thel as to why she keeps a gun under her pillow is met with the astonished reply: 'this is America'. Jarmusch is a director whose attitude towards cinematic violence is ambiguous. Although acts of violence often appear as clumsy, messy or pointless in *Dead Man*, the violence in *Ghost Dog: The Way of the Samurai* (1999) seems acceptable due to the protagonist's chosen mode of life; the violence in this film often has a balletic quality. In *Dead Man* though, it seems that the act of violence is, to borrow Rosenbaum's phrase, 'deprived of any pretence at existential purity' (2000: 37). Violence seems senseless and the first sequence of bloodshed in the film (the gratuitous slaughter of buffalo which is undoubtedly a cinematic reference to a similar scene in Ford's *The Searchers*) highlights this. This constitutes one of the many symptoms of the breakdown of action-image in the film as the performance of certain acts lack a distinct function or purpose: cause and effect become detached, making the very act of violence seem ridiculous and futile. An act of violence may function as a catalyst for the film's loose narrative, but from the point of Blake shooting Dickinson's son and onwards the plot becomes meandering and unpredictable with little sense of events being driven towards a definitive conclusion. The purposeful drive of the classical Western narrative, which moves towards an unequivocal resolution and confirms a set of ideals, is replaced with Deleuze's 'trip' or 'ballad' (2005: 3) form where the protagonists wander, unfettered from the need to reach any particular end. This loose movement is also demonstrated through discontinuities in direction; frequently the protagonists appear to be travelling from left to right, only for the next sequence to show them travelling from right to left, as though they were erasing their own tracks. In this context, the journey from East to West is not the progressive and expansionist one of Western myth. In *Dead Man*, the journey from East to West is recast as the journey from birth to death through a process of deconstruction, so that the

major part of the film shows a ritual process in preparation to 'pass through to the other side'. Jarmusch acknowledges the allegorical rather than literal nature of the journey in his film: 'on the surface it's a very simple story and a simple metaphor that the physical life is this journey that we take...that's the story for me, that's what it is about.' (Rosenbaum 2001: 32) Rosenbaum (2001: 51) acknowledges this, but tends to see it pessimistically: '(i)n most Western versions of the east-to-west journey, there's a movement towards enlightenment and freedom, but *Dead Man* almost reverses that, turning it into a movement towards death.' Undoubtedly, for Nobody, the film's central Native American Indian character, life is a journey back to 'the land of the spirits', the world of origin from which we are separated at birth and are reunited with in death, but this journey is not a bleak one. Throughout the film, Blake undergoes a process of metamorphosis that allows him to change character; his death does not signal an end, but yet another change within the context of the journey with which the film presents us.<sup>28</sup> Radically and positively, Jarmusch exchanges the journey of cultural progress and development with that of the spiritual journey from birth to death and not only subverts traditional motifs of the Western along the way, but also questions notions such as identity and truth.

### *Deterritorialisation, Liminality and Communitas.*

Both Blake and Nobody can be described as liminal entities; Blake is an anomalous figure from the outset in *Machine*; he has lost everything that linked him with the social or structured world: he has been recently orphaned, abandoned by his fiancé, and has lost his job. Nobody is an American Indian of mixed blood (Blackfoot and Blood), but neither tribe accepts him; his identity is defined by not being part of anything, and the name he has chosen for himself reflects this; he exists alone in the forest, separated from the structure of tribal life. Blake is also a liminal figure in a very literal manner, as he is between life and death for the greater part of the film. Reflecting the central protagonist's threshold status, *Dead Man* shows in detail the rite of passage that enables the main character's passing from life to death. Indeed, the ritual process invoked in the film is to aid Blake's 'passing through the mirror' so as to reach his origin - a journey that is neatly woven into the very form of the film as its ending mirrors its beginning. By reconfiguring

---

<sup>28</sup> Some critics, such as Rosenbaum (2001), have a resolutely bleak view of the film seeing Blake as no more enlightened at the end of the film than he is at the start. However, the protagonists' quest throughout the film is not for enlightenment or ultimate knowledge. Rather, it presents the protagonist's journey as a liminal one in which the subject is ground down in order to become - other enabling the final 'passing through' the mirror that Nobody speaks of.



the archetypal Western hero and positing him as what Turner (1969: 94) would call a 'passenger', Jarmusch recasts the whole landscape and ideology of the Western within a liminal framework.

Within the context of both the rite of passage and the Western genre, thresholds are very important. As we have seen, the frontier traditionally constitutes the line between civilisation and the wilderness, law/order and licentiousness, culture and savagery, the closed and the open. Van Gennep (1960: 20) stresses the importance of thresholds in any ritual process as they demarcate the boundaries between territories or social worlds and, by extension, identities. As mentioned earlier, Blake's journey from East to West is symbolically shown in the film's opening sequence as the train's passengers, dressed in bearskins, become evermore wild and hostile-looking. One of the most curious occurrences in this scene is the fireman's speech to Blake. His words are oddly prophetic of the last scene in the film in which Blake floats off into oblivion in a sea canoe: 'doesn't this remind you of when you were in the boat, and then later that night, you were lying looking up at the ceiling and the water in your head was not dissimilar from the landscape. And you think to yourself, "why is it that the landscape is moving but the boat is still?"' This has led some critics to speculate as to whether Blake is dead from the opening scene of the film and is therefore stuck inside a time-loop. Gregg Rickman (Kitses and Rickman 1999: 400-1) notes that if this reading is accepted, then: '(t)he fireman is Blake's Charon, ferrying his body on an iron chariot across into Hades, the land of the dead, even as Nobody later attempts to guide him into the next world.' Blake's passage between East and West also designates his crossing into death here, then. It is Blake's crossing over into the wilderness that signals truly his movement into a liminal zone. The landscape is no longer defined in terms of recognisable landmarks. Instead of the wide open, awe-inspiring vistas that are common in the Western, the diegetic setting in *Dead Man* is mostly forest and wilderness in which it is easy to lose one's coordinates. Once Blake awakes in the forest, both his status and his identity immediately change to that of a 'dead man' and a 'visionary' poet. Van Gennep (1960: 130) notes that, 'changing one's name or one's personality' is often considered to be a 'rite of separation' (1960: 130). Here, by being divested of his original identity and his status as a living, white, middle-class accountant from Cleveland, he begins to resemble the 'blank slate' (Turner 1969: 103) that is characteristic of the liminal entity. Indeed, throughout the rest of the film, many of the rituals performed, such as the act of anointment with pastes and the adoption of a certain diet, resemble Van Gennep's delineation of the rites of separation (1960: 130). In addition to this, rituals that are constitutive of the rites of incorporation, such as those that accompany commensality and the smoking of tobacco, are also seen in the latter part of the film. In the film, it is made clear by Nobody that

he is being slowly separated from the land of the living and being prepared to enter 'the world of the spirits'. The liminal person often undergoes some kind of ordeal as part of the ritual process; Turner (1969: 95) notes that liminal persons must: 'accept arbitrary punishment without complaint.' Blake undergoes a number of ordeals aside from his physical affliction – he is exposed to life-threatening situations which require that he learn to handle a gun and he unwittingly has to go without food and water as part of a quest for vision.

It is during the liminal stage that the usual hierarchies common to society no longer pertain and that *communitas* can be formed. In *Dead Man*, we see both negative and constructive representations of *communitas*. Blake encounters three fur trappers who are living in the wilderness and have formed their own provisional family unit. In other words, they have tried to re-institute a form of societal structure within a liminal zone. According to Turner (1969: 129), this sort of phenomenon is the result of a natural impulse within man: 'the immediacy of *communitas* gives way to the mediacy of structure,' he writes. However, although they adopt the traditional roles of the housekeeper, the father figure and the spoilt child, these roles are deconstructed by being placed within this liminal context, and, as a result, the implicit violence and control required to maintain such a 'gendered' structure is revealed. Indeed, Rosenbaum (2001: 51) comments that Jarmusch's presentation of 'society' here is a very dark one: 'what's disturbing about *Dead Man* is that the whole sense of society...is pretty nightmarish whenever it turns up. You get the feeling that between these isolated outposts of civilisation, anything can happen.' In fact, it is implied that the fur trappers have survived by capturing people, killing and eating them and that this is what they are planning to do with Blake until Nobody rescues him.

The female figure, or, in this case, the 'mother', who is typically associated with morality and civilisation in the Western is replaced with a man in a dress and a bonnet here.<sup>29</sup> Sally is played by the recognisable rock-pop star, Iggy Pop, a man who is renowned for his androgynous looks, drug abuse and volatile behaviour. In this liminal zone, the sharply defined boundaries between male and female that are maintained in structured society have collapsed. Turner (1969: 104) comments that androgyny is common of liminal entities who are often marked by: 'the absence of marked sexual polarity'. Judith Butler's work on gender and sexuality in her book *Gender Trouble* (2006) seems highly relevant to this discussion of structured society/gender and

---

<sup>29</sup> In the traditional Western, the female figure appears in two forms: the whore and the young bride or mother. The former often functions as a quasi teacher, while the latter is often naïve and innocent and represents the 'home' and civilising forces.

liminality/androgeneity. Butler argues that the concepts of gender and sex have been naturalised by 'society', which deems what is appropriate and what is not; the transvestite, however, upsets binary oppositions as s/he lays bare the constructed nature of gender and renders fixed binary oppositions ambiguous, or in the words of Butler, s/he 'queers' the boundaries between male and female. Butler (2007: 191) writes: '(g)ender ought not to be construed as a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts follow; rather, gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a *stylized repetition of acts*.' Butler sees the formation of gender as being intrinsically tied to repetitious performance and the collective acknowledgment and acceptance by society of particular definitions of 'femininity' and 'masculinity'. Butler's positive theory helps to break apart binary oppositions that classify one person as normal and another as aberrant in a hierarchical society. As we have seen, according to Turner (1969: 106), in a liminal zone, 'sex distinctions' are 'minimized'. In the scene in question in *Dead Man*, gender is made fluid and 'femininity', alongside the domestic role it has come to designate, seems to be as easily assumed by a man as it is by a woman;<sup>30</sup> yet, this 'queering' of gendered division is not presented positively here, because 'femininity' has been re-appropriated in order to re-enforce violently a social hierarchy within a liminal zone. The *lines of flight* to becoming other are closed up by the imposition of a social structure that mirrors the norms of established or accepted society; the subsequent bloodshed that erupts here in the film lays bare the implicit violence required to sustain hierarchies and boundaries and, in particular, the dangers of doing this in a liminal space that is more conducive to opening up possibilities and breaking down structure.

---

<sup>30</sup> 'Sally' is heard muttering at the end of the scene 'I cooked, I cleaned...'. In her attire of a pinafore and a bonnet, she resembles an almost grotesque version of femininity because 'she' is played by Iggy Pop.





Figure 20: Iggy Pop as Sally.

A positive view of liminal bonding also emerges during the course of the film. It is only within this liminal zone where order and hierarchy are jettisoned that a real kinship can develop between a white man and a Native American Indian. The relationship between Blake and Nobody is not the usual one of the traditional Western where the Indian is either the sworn enemy of the white man, as in John Ford's *Stagecoach* (1939), or a noble savage who expresses aphoristic wisdom to the white man, as in Delmer Daves' *Broken Arrow* (1950). Rather, both Blake and Nobody are shown to be flawed characters with prejudices and assumptions of their own. Nobody's designation of Blake as a 'stupid fucking white man' throughout the film and the fact that he has been separated from his own tribe because of his mixed racial background demonstrate that the Native American is not as simple a figure as Western myth has made him out to be. Jacquelyn Kilpatrick (1999: 170) notes of this more 'realistic' presentation of the Native American in the film: 'one of the most positive things about *Dead Man* is that its creator consciously avoided making Native Americans into an all-purpose metaphor for the oppressed, or the typical noble or bloodthirsty savage.' Divested of these hackneyed attributes, Blake and Nobody can form a bond that is not usually seen in the Western. Throughout the middle section of the film, which shows Blake's journey through the forest to the Makah settlement, a number of rites that Van Gennep would characterise as 'incorporation' acts can be seen. Van Gennep notes that the following are rites of incorporation: 'binding one to the other with a single cord; touching each other reciprocally in some way; using objects belonging to the other (milk, betel,

tobacco, occupational elements); offering each other something to eat or drink; eating together; ...sitting on the same seat...anointing (with blood or clay); ... entering the new house...these are essentially rites of union.' (1960: 132) The first scene featuring Nobody shows him trying to retrieve the bullet from Blake's chest and thus, to save him; he is clearly concerned about Blake and his actions also bind him to Blake as his carer. Once Nobody believes that Blake is the poet, 'William Blake', he decides to lead him across the forest and ties Blake's horse to his own; this scene stages a clever reversal of the typical 'buddy' moment in the Western where the white man and his Native American companion travel side by side, but the white man is seen to take up more of the frame than the Native American or to be given more 'screen time', for example as seen in Dave's *Broken Arrow* (1950) which was one of the first films to offer a positive presentation of a Native American. Here, Blake is Nobody's passenger and Nobody is Blake's guide; they both take up equal amounts of the frame (Nobody the right-hand side and Blake following behind him on the left-hand side). There are also a number of scenes in which Nobody and Blake sit by a campfire together on the same log and, although this is a familiar scene of a comradeship that is not unique to the Western, it does signal that an important bond is forming between these two usually disparate characters. Most significant of all of these acts though is Nobody's anointing of Blake with a clay paste after he has ingested peyote. Nobody's ingestion of Peyote as a way of communicating with the spirits is a way of seeking solace for Blake; he knows that Blake is a 'dead man' and his vision of him as a skeleton, seen shortly after he ingests the substance, confirms this; however, by communicating with the spirits, Nobody tries to unite Blake with the natural world, an act which will aid him 'to pass through the mirror'. Significantly, although Blake does not share in the taking of peyote, he is included within the ritual through the acts of anointment and fasting. Indeed, Nobody's ingestion of peyote ensures that he can share in Blake's quest for vision, even though they are physically separated during this period.<sup>31</sup> A

---

<sup>31</sup> *Dead Man* is clearly not a film that constitutes a sociological study; nonetheless, some information on the role of peyote in rituals may be useful. Peyote is a hallucinogenic substance that plays an important role in Native American and Mexican rituals. Richard Evans Schultes and Albert Hoffman (2007) note in their book on the sacred properties of plants that it enables the ritual subject to have visions and foretell the future and that it is also seen by Native Americans as a sacred substance as it allows: 'the individual to communicate with God without the medium of a priest.' Moreover, in her article on the use of peyote within religious rituals, Ruth Shonle (1925: 59) notes that, for an experienced user, ingesting peyote can act as a kind of short cut in the ritual process as it helps the Indian to: 'get into immediate touch with the supernatural without the long period of fasting.' In other words, the ingestion of peyote and the act of fasting can produce similar hallucinogenic experiences. In addition to these magical properties, it is also highly regarded for its medicinal properties; however, one must bear in mind that in Native American culture, medicine is divided into two categories. The first group comprises those medicines that have an immediate effect of mitigation and work like conventional medicines. The second group, according to Schultes and Hoffman (2007): 'put the medicine man into communication, through a variety of hallucinations, with the malevolent spirits that cause illness and death.' These medicines do not 'cure' the illness, but can help to illumine the source of the problem.

recurring element in the narrative is Nobody's incessant question, which functions like a ritualistic incantation: 'William Blake, do you have any tobacco?' Blake's unchanging reply that he does not 'smoke' may demonstrate his lack of awareness of Nobody's culture: Nobody does not want the tobacco to smoke, but sees it as a necessary object to aid Blake's rite of passage 'through the mirror'. However, the sharing of tobacco also symbolises friendship and thus may demonstrate Nobody's wish to bind himself to Blake.<sup>32</sup> The running joke about tobacco lasts up until the end of the film when Nobody tells Blake that he has put some in the sea canoe for Blake's 'journey' and Blake repeats his earlier answer.



Figure 21: Dead man. Nobody's peyote-fuelled vision of Blake.

---

<sup>32</sup> Jarmusch notes the discrepancy between Western attitudes towards tobacco and its significance in Native American culture: 'it just seems funny how the Western attitude is "wow, people are addicted to this, think of all the money you can make off of this."' For indigenous people here, it's still a sacrament; it's what you bring to someone's house, it's what you smoke when you pray.' (Rosenbaum 2001: 35) The use of tobacco provides an apt link with the effects of the Western 'civilising' and progressive force on the landscape in the film. While tobacco is a sacred substance to one culture, it is an addictive pleasure for another and thus, a commodity that can be packaged and sold.



As we have seen, in using the Western genre, Jarmusch aims to dismantle the Western myth of the frontier in order to show what is not usually visualised and make the spectator think creatively. In his seminal work on mythology, Roland Barthes notes how myth, through its simplicity, is often taken to be representative of a natural state of affairs in the world and thus, a reflection of truth. According to Barthes (2000: 151), in mythical presentation: 'all soiling trace of origin or choice has been removed'. Myth hides its manufactured nature and passes itself off as something that is timeless, unchanging and, above all, true. Barthes (2000:143) writes: '(i)n passing from history to nature, myth acts economically: it abolishes the complexity of human acts, it gives them the simplicity of essences...it organises a world that is without contradictions because it is without depth...things appear to mean something in themselves.' Myth can be used to conceal 'other' histories, particularly when its strategies are passed off as invisible - as they often are in films through the use of the continuity system. Raymond Durgnat and Scott Simmon (Kitses and Rickman 1999: 69) state of this expedient use of myth in the Western: '(s)ome critics defensively use "history" and "myth" almost interchangeably, making myth look simply like a stylisation of history. But myth may also be a defence mechanism against history's other, unwelcome facts. Myths don't only bolster a culture's most confident beliefs. They can also explain away whatever might sap that confidence.' This interpretation of myth is strengthened further through its connection to the work of Claude Levi-Strauss on the structures and meanings of myth. Levi-Strauss notes that one of the essential powers of myth is its ability to consolidate contradictions, even if this is logically impossible. He writes: '(t)he inability to connect two kinds of relationships is overcome (or rather replaced) by the assertion that contradictory relationships are identical inasmuch as they are both self-contradictory in the same way.' (Levi-Strauss 1963: 216) This is to say that which does not 'fit' with an account can be consolidated into a narrative through the very fact of its contradiction. In such a way, every element is made to uphold a certain portrait of events. Levi-Strauss (1963: 224) notes further that all 'mythical thought' progresses from 'opposition' to 'resolution' so that what was once seemingly disparate and incongruous is consolidated through manufactured similarity. When myth is able to pass itself off as the logical end of something or as 'correct' it can pass unquestioned as the basis on which it is built seems self-evident and solid.

In order to break through the 'naturalism' on which myth relies and its naturalisation within culture, it is necessary to lay bare the devices at play and question the use of cliché. As we have seen, Deleuze (2005: 3) notes two uses of the cliché: firstly, it is part of the cinema of action as it allows for immediate comprehension and facilitates ease of movement within and completion of the narrative; secondly, when it is made noticeable, it evidences the collapse of the continuity system. The cliché is a device that keeps us from seeing the whole thing in itself so that we only see what it is 'useful' for us to see. Likewise, myth can be a practical mechanism for portraying a certain version of events that it is perhaps necessary to believe in order to maintain an existing order or structure. Cliché and myth function in similar ways: by flattening or emptying out an image in order to make it simple, easily readable and comprehensible. Both devices are part of a process of cultural exchange through which images are collectively read and understood. Indeed, as we know, film genre perpetuates its popularity largely through the use of accepted and popularised images and ideas.

As discussed earlier, the 'multiplication of clichés' (Deleuze 2005: 3) is one of the symptoms that Deleuze (2005: 176) notes in his description of the crisis of the action-image: 'stereotypes, clichés, ready-made visions and formulas took away the outside world and the interiority of the characters in the same decomposition.' Yet, by highlighting the presence of hackneyed images, a director can lay bare the constructed nature of a particular kind of representation on film; by exposing certain cinematic devices, Jarmusch questions the form of 'truth' that the Western, in its more classical form, has propagated. In the process, he reveals the constructed nature of many images that have become 'naturalised' within the Western genre. As discussed at the beginning of this chapter, according to Deleuze, a cinema of time does not aim at a representation of 'truth' reinforced by a logical narrative; Deleuze, using his own interpretation of Nietzsche, argues that, rather, the 'powers of the false' (2005: 122) are manifest in a cinema of time. This is to say that what the cinema of time reveals is the *provisional* and *constructed* nature of 'truth'; the will to falsehood should not be confused with deception: it is the power to deconstruct or undo hegemonic 'truths' or principles in favour of life's creative qualities. D.N Rodowick writes that the 'powers of the false' affirm: 'the becoming of an ascendant life that creates new possibilities and experiments with new modes of existence.' (2009: 103) This is to say that 'the powers of the false' undo dominant modes of thought that stifle 'life' and *becoming* by replacing possibility and difference with homogeneity and *one* version of the 'truth'. It is precisely this positive will to falsehood that Jarmusch seems to use in *Dead Man* by 'undoing' the central visual motifs and narrative tenets of the classical Western. As argued earlier, by using a

genre that is associated with purposive action, Jarmusch undermines viewer's expectations through the way he presents 'action' on screen.

Once Blake enters the wilderness, his journey seems less linear and predictable - something that is demonstrated through the frequent lack of continuity in direction in the film. As we shall see, the scenes in the forest can be likened to 'the form of the trip / ballad' (Deleuze 2005: 3), which Deleuze identifies in modern cinema, while the main protagonist does not function like the typical Western 'hero' due to his weakening physical condition and to his being genuinely maladroit in this environment. As we have seen, it is the malfunctioning of the sensory-motor schema that, according to Deleuze (2005: 20), acts as the catalyst for the cinema of the time-image: 'if our sensory-motor schemata jam or break, a different type of image can appear: a pure optical-sound image, the whole image without metaphor, brings out the thing in itself, literally, in its excess of horror or beauty, in its radical or unjustifiable character, because it no longer has to be "justified"'. Nieland (2001: 175) cites as examples of these images 'without metaphor', the scene of Blake's entry into Machine and the images associated with the character of Cole Wilson who: 'leaves behind him a trail of horrific "opsigns"' such as the marshal's crushed skull, which he says looks like 'a goddamn religious icon'. Equally important however, are those that lay bare or 'actualise' previously 'virtual' images within the classical Western canon; *Dead Man* is composed of the images that latently surround the 'actual' or more common images in the classical Western. The scene in which Blake is left to fend for himself by Nobody and unwittingly undergoes a visionary experience induced by hunger is a very important one in this respect. Blake suddenly becomes aware of, and rather frightened by, the faces of several Native Americans that appear out of the foliage. Karlyn (2007: 16) states that these images are the result of a new found 'vision' that allows: 'Blake to see the faces in the trees, the Native American spirit present from the beginning of the American intrusion into the west.' In other words, the very thing that is usually kept from the spectator's eyes is made apparent here; these faces appear as though part of the landscape, which suggests that their presence is an original and natural one. In fact, it could be argued that this is a reversal of the typical Western narrative that posits the Native American presence as a blot on the frontier landscape that needs to be eradicated. Here, the assumed right of the westerner to appropriate land is shown to be a fallacy. Critics have noted the fact that this scene comes after Blake has had his glasses removed by Nobody and his vision has thereby been empowered, as it allows him to see what Deleuze (2005: 19) would call the 'thing in itself' rather than what it is in his 'interest to perceive'. It is clear from Blake's reaction, and the fact that he aims a gun at these faces, that he is shocked by this vision.





**Figure 22: Faces in the trees.**

As we have seen in the introduction to this thesis, Deleuze (2005: 126) states that since antiquity: 'time has always put the notion of truth into crisis.' The various images of time that Deleuze delineates in *Cinema-2*, that confound the boundaries between the real and imaginary (the *hyalosign*) and the true and the false (the *chronosign*) throw these dichotomies into crisis. As noted earlier, the Western is a genre associated with the myth of the frontier, the strong and virile male who upholds a rather puritanical moral code, and the appropriation of land for the sake of progress and civilisation. It is also the most popular form of culture through which American history has been filtered and collectively understood; although previous neo-Westerns had gone some way to try and dismantle the power of the myth of the frontier, they were never quite iconoclastic enough to disperse or reveal the ideological forces at play within the genre and its construction of a 'truthful' history. Susan Kollin (2000: 128) notes that earlier attempts at reconfiguring the Western: 'while [they] continued the process of politicizing the genre, ...typically left in place many of its presuppositions, laying blame at the doorstep of a few bad individuals while often failing to question the founding principles of the western adventure itself.' In contrast with earlier revisionist versions of the Western, the 'trip/ballad' (2005:3) structure of *Dead Man* dismantles any pretence to 'truth'; indeed, Blake tells the fur trappers that he is travelling with 'n/Nobody' and he does 'not know' where he is going. Blake is unsure in his environment and unable to react or respond accordingly. The conventional Western landscape of

monument valley, so associated with the films of John Ford, is replaced here with a wooded landscape in which it is hard to find one's place and this environment overwhelms rather than inspires its protagonist. Robby Müller's black and white photography may hark back to the origins of the Western and the generic tradition of representing 'good' in white and 'bad' in black, but the protagonists' desultory movements and the camera's meandering and discontinuous style do not conform to the resolute drive of a narrative which re-affirms dichotomies and ideals such as good and bad, right and wrong and savage and civilised. There is little sense of the film moving towards a conclusive finale; rather Jarmusch leaves his protagonist drifting off into an inchoate landscape towards a horizon, a scene which points beyond tidy conclusions and refuses to assuage the viewer's confusion. Szaloky (Walker 2001: 56) confirms this: '(i)n order to invoke the return of what official histories have repressed, the film assumes a loose and episodic structure, with sequences reminiscent of the wakefulness of intermittent dreams. Frequent, extended blackouts punctuate the flow of images highlighting the narrative significance of structuring absences.' Yet the film does not dismantle these entrenched ideas in order to replace them with another set of ideals. Rather, the intermittent blackouts that separate out the various sections of the film indicate the impossibility of confirming any pre-established or accepted norms. Additionally, Jarmusch's idiosyncratic temporal presentation counters the notion of time as the mark of progress.

As noted in the introduction to this thesis, in the movement-image cinema, it is possible to link formally and organise every scene as part of an ever-expanding whole that works towards a conclusion, but the very structure of the time-image cinema makes this impossible. Following Jean-Louis Schefer, Deleuze (2005: 163) suggests that the modern cinema forces the viewer to confront the limitations of his/her own thought: 'the cinematographic image, as soon as it takes on its aberration of movement...affects the visible with a *disturbance*, which, far from making thought visible [points towards] ...what does not let itself be thought in thought, and equally to what does not let itself be seen in vision...thought, in cinema, is brought face to face with its own impossibility, and yet draws from this a higher power of birth.' In *Dead Man*, it is the fade-outs, which lead to a black screen in between scenes, which suggest the limitation of thought and evoke the state of liminality. As we have seen, Deleuze states that in the classical cinematic regime the interstice between two images brings them together through a logical link. In the modern cinematic regime, the interstice becomes autonomous by no longer being associated with the previous or following sequence and, thus, acts as a force of separation; he writes: '(w)hat counts is on the contrary the *interstice* between images, between two images: a spacing which

means that each image is plucked from the void and falls back into it.'(Deleuze 2005: 173) These liminal moments break apart conventional axioms of thought; the very structure of *Dead Man* foregrounds what remains latent in conventional representation as it reveals the hidden principle in any binary opposition. Normally, the spectator is able to associate images syntagmatically through a logical process by which it is possible to 'formally deduce...ideas from each other.' (Deleuze 2005: 161) In *Dead Man*, this logical process is made impossible by the interstice that prevents thought from proceeding in a typical manner. Rather, the separation between the scenes points towards the absence that any dominant version of events, or a relation of a particular 'history', is structured around. In *Dead Man*, the unbelievable and hackneyed nature of some of the characters and sequences that open the film give way to the realm of possibility in its final scenes. These liminal moments in the film's structure suggest an alternative reality where the possibility of constructing another history that takes into account what has been jettisoned can be explored. The black screen can also be viewed as an example of Deleuze's *opsign* – the purely visual image that precipitates vision and thought rather than action, while making us 'grasp...something intolerable and unbearable' (Deleuze 2005: 17). As purely visual and temporal moments in the film, these sections of void point towards the 'unbearable' history that has not been addressed fully in the Western genre. Furthermore, as the antithesis of the cliché, these periods expose something beyond the hackneyed portraits associated with the Western genre. In order to break through the cliché, as we have seen, Deleuze states that: 'sometimes...it is necessary to make holes, to introduce voids and white spaces, to rarify the image, by suppressing many things that have been added to make us believe that we are seeing everything. It is necessary to make a division or make emptiness in order to find the whole again.' (Deleuze 2005: 20-21) In order to dismantle the frontier myth, Jarmusch falsifies the generic elements associated with the Western genre through overt use of the cliché and finally suppresses these elements so as to hint at the unwritten stories left out of official versions of history.

Unlike narratives that are driven by the need for resolution of a situation through action, the episodic structure of *Dead Man* lends each sequence a certain autonomy by which the scenes become individual sequences, while the order of these sequences becomes unpredictable. Kent Jones (1996: 46) reflects this in his review of the film: '*Dead Man* is actually structured as an epic film poem with rhyming figures...and refrains...sequences have no standardized shape, and the black-outs create an effect of pockets of time cupped from a rushing river of life.' Indeed, Jarmusch used this kind of structure deliberately: '(w)e had in the back of our minds while shooting, that scenes would resolve in and of themselves without being determined by the next



incoming image.’ (Rosenbaum 2000: 43) As a result of this, the sequences tend to become disconnected from each other and there is no way of deducing what the following scene should be. From the moment Blake wakes up in the forest, the whole trajectory of the film is unpredictable; for example, the scene, which takes place in daytime, in which Nobody tells Blake that he can tell that they are being followed is situated between two scenes with the bounty hunters which take place at night time. In both of the scenes with the bounty hunters, they are camping by an open fire; either these two scenes represent continuous action or they take place on consecutive nights, but it is impossible to tell. There is no logical reason as to why the day scene between Blake and Nobody divides these two scenes; the flow of action is very loose and there is no motive given as to why one scene follows on from another. Deleuze (2005: 125), with reference to modern cinema, states that: ‘when the connecting of parts is not predetermined but can take place in a number of ways: it is a space which is disconnected, purely optical, sound or even tactile’. With its sections of long-takes, scenes full of idle time and waiting, its discontinuities in direction and the raw sound of Neil Young’s sparse electric guitar score that replaces any need for dialogue, *Dead Man* is more of a contemplative film than one of predictable action. As we know, for Deleuze, a purely optical and sonic cinema is fundamentally linked to cerebral processes rather than pure entertainment. The kind of thought to which this cinema is intrinsically connected is not one that confirms pre-determined ideas, but rather one that opens up the mind to the very creation of thought and life’s *becoming*.

### Identity and Becoming.

Blake experiences liminality not only geographically (by being out in the wilderness), but also through a disintegrating sense of self. As we have seen, Turner (1969: 95) notes that the identity of a liminal entity is inherently ‘ambiguous and indeterminate’ and cannot be easily classified. Indeed, ambiguity and indeterminacy are perhaps the only two qualities that can be confidently ascribed to the character of Blake in *Dead Man*. As an unwitting ritual subject, Blake’s personality is worn away both by those surrounding him and through the ordeals he suffers during a liminal period out in the forest, but this is part of a process that helps to prepare him for a new stage of life. Turner (1969: 95) writes of liminal ritual subjects: ‘(i)t is as though they are being reduced or ground down to a uniform condition to be fashioned anew and endowed with additional powers to enable them to cope with their new station in life.’ Throughout the film, Blake has personality traits inscribed upon him. At the beginning of the film, he is neither the brutal murderer that

Dickinson portrays him as to the bounty hunters, nor is he the visionary poet 'William Blake' whom Nobody mistakes him for; however, during his time out in the wilderness he is forced to become a vicious killer in order to survive and he comes to accept Nobody's misappropriation of his name by creating his own form of 'poetry' through violence. By the end of the film, he has amassed a number of killings in his name including the deaths of Charlie and Thel (the latter wrongly so), a bear trapper, two marshals, and a missionary, and he is able to shoot with deadly accuracy. Moreover, Blake slowly starts to adopt the clothing of the Native American throughout the film as Nobody gives him pieces of attire, such as a bear-skin coat and paints his face with tribal markings. By the end of the film, he bears little resemblance to the 'dandy'- like persona he was at its beginning. He becomes increasingly palimpsest-like throughout the film; overlaid with other people's inscriptions and descriptions, he assumes readily the attributes of other personalities. Eventually, it is impossible to tell who the 'original' William Blake was. Jarmusch affirms this: '(h)e's...like a blank piece of paper that everybody wants to write all over, which is why I like Johnny [Depp] so much as an actor for that character, because he has that quality.' (Rosenbaum 2000: 68) This description of Blake/Depp is strikingly reminiscent of Turner's characterisation of the liminal person and the importance of his ambiguity for the ritual process: '(t)he neophyte in liminality must be a *tabula rasa*, a blank slate, on which is inscribed the knowledge and wisdom of the group, in those respects that pertain to the new status...they have to be shown that in themselves they are clay or dust, mere matter'. (1969: 103) Blake is involved in a process akin to that of *becoming*, which, as we have seen, cannot be achieved without *detritorialisation*. Although Blake has things inscribed upon him by other people, it is clear that he is really involved in a process of 'becoming-imperceptible' (Deleuze and Guatarri 1988: 279), as his 'personality' disintegrates until it is impossible to know or state definitively who he is.

Blake is taken out of his structured, quotidian environment and routine, placed in one where little hierarchy or structure exists and his very being becomes increasingly fragmented. Blake is seen undergoing a series of changes in order to transfer from one state to the other; in *Dead Man*, part of this process is achieved through close contact with nature, which is shown in a very literal way. When Blake is forced by Nobody to endure a quest for vision, he finds a dead fawn in the forest and lays down beside it in a foetus-like position. Blake initially tastes the animal's blood and then uses it to paint further tribal markings onto his own face. In an overhead shot that spins clockwise, Blake and the fawn are brought into physical contact as their images blur into one. The circular camera movement and the use of superimposition of trees and leaves help the

viewer to experience viscerally the immersion of Blake in his environment here. As we have seen in the first chapter, according to Deleuze and Guatarri (1988: 275), in order for a becoming to happen, one has to get close to an 'other'; it is a question of: 'emitting particles that enter the relation of movement and rest, or the zone of proximity'. Significantly, this immersion into nature counts as the last stage in Blake's becoming before the ritual ceremony at the Makah settlement that will allow him to 'pass through the mirror'. Deleuze notes that all *becomings* end in a *becoming-imperceptible*: 'if becoming-woman is the first quantum, or molecular segment, with the becomings-animal that link up with it coming next, what are they all rushing toward? Without a doubt, toward becoming-imperceptible. The imperceptible is the immanent end of becoming, its cosmic formula.' (Deleuze and Guatarri 1988: 279) Blake's journey is, according to Nobody, a journey back to his origins – the land of the spirits from which he came, and to which he must return – and functions as a *becoming-imperceptible*. The opening train journey into a land that seems to be progressively threatening and uncivilised functions as Blake's *becoming-woman* as he moves away from the structured social world and all that is familiar to him. Furthermore, his alliance with Nobody is a further stage on his route to *becoming-minor*. Together, they form a line of flight away from established society and its rules and form their own bond that defies what is socially accepted or sanctioned. As a cultural document, *Dead Man*, the whole premise of which is to challenge pre-conceived notions associated with the Western genre, could be likened to a *becoming-minor*.<sup>33</sup> Every metamorphosis that Blake goes through is another stage on his journey back to 'the land of the spirits'. In conjunction with this, many of the rites that Nobody performs such as the consumption of peyote, the anointment of Blake's face with paste, the chanting of incantations, and forced starvation so as to aid the quest for vision, are done in preparation for Blake's departure. These rites normally directly precede a change in Blake's personality; for instance, it is after Nobody has ingested Peyote and performed an incantation, that he sees the skull exposed beneath Blake's white skin; he then paints Blake's face with two markings and informs him that the quest for vision is a 'great' one and that one must go without 'food and water' to achieve it; then, he removes his eye glasses and leaves Blake on his own. The scene that follows this not only offers evidence of Blake's greater awareness of nature through point of view shots that focus in closely on trees and foliage, but also his change into a ruthless killer and his assumption of the name and artistic 'persona' of the poet, William Blake. When he meets the two incompetent marshals who simply ask him if he is William Blake, he replies, 'yes, I

---

<sup>33</sup> Becoming-minor has nothing to do with becoming a minority. It has to do with finding a break-away path from within a hegemonic value system, so as to undermine and, hopefully, partially unravel *major* institutions, ideologies and identities. For Deleuze, undoing the *major* has positive connotations because: 'it is dangerous to confine oneself to such a subject [the major], which does not function without drying up a spring or stopping a flow.' (Deleuze 1988: 226)



am. Do you know my poetry?’ and then shoots them. Realising that one of the marshals is still alive, he quotes Blake while looking at his dying victim and says: ‘some are born to endless night.’ (Blake 2004: 506) A panning shot, representing Blake’s point of view, shows the two marshals lying back to back; the blood is slowly seeping out of one creating a pooling effect around his head and the other has his head resting on a fan of twigs, which makes him look like a religious icon. Blake’s point of view evidences his personal transformation here; death is no longer associated with decay and destruction because it is formally poeticised. Moreover, the important role that the natural world plays in this transformation is stressed both sonically and visually by Jarmusch; the sounds of nature (wind blowing through trees and birdsong) come through prominently on the soundtrack, whilst his use of a telephoto lens to film this particular scene ensures that the background and foreground of the film frame are brought together; visually, the characters seem to be embedded in the natural world here and no longer stand apart from it.



**Figure 23: Blake becoming-nature.**

The rites that are performed in *Dead Man* help to move Blake closer to the world of his origin (as Nobody calls it) and to guide him through a series of transformations in the process. As noted previously, the Deleuzian image of time, known as the *genesign*, reveals the mutability of the human body and undermines ossified notions such as a one true self or stable identity by registering the flux of bodily change over time; Deleuze writes: ‘(t)his second type of chronosign,

the genesign, has therefore also the property of bringing into question the notion of truth; for the false ceases to be a simple appearance or even a lie, in order to achieve that power of becoming which constitutes series or degrees, which crosses limits, carries out metamorphoses, and develops along its whole path an act of legend, of story-telling. Beyond the true or false, becoming as power of the false.’ (Deleuze 2005: 264) Through Blake’s metamorphoses, the central tenets of the Western myth are also brought into question; in a narrative world that deals with unpredictability, uncertainty and continual change, a perennial myth, such as the virile but morally right white man who overcomes the primitive and savage Indian, no longer have currency. Deleuze’s comments on *time as series* or the *genesign* have resonance: ‘the point of this is less to tell a story than to develop and transform bodily attitudes.’ (2005: 186) Yet this transformation of ‘bodily attitudes’ is also linked to a transformation in thinking that directly confronts and complicates ossified moral principles. Likewise, the purpose of *Dead Man* is not to relate a story, but rather to focus on and examine the effects of trauma on the human body, industrialisation on the landscape and the settler on the indigenous population.

The human body in *Dead Man* functions as, to borrow Deleuze’s phrase, the ‘revealer of the deadline’ (Deleuze 2005: 182); time has passed into the body and is shown through the corporeal modes of ‘tiredness’, ‘waiting’ (Deleuze 2005: 183) and disintegration. Blake’s body becomes a marker of time as it registers these modes, a process which finally ends in death. In the last scene of the film that takes place at the Native American Makah settlement, Blake’s demise is presented visually and sonically in a number of ways. His body is fast failing him and his point of view on the world is represented through slow and meandering camera movements that mimic a state of falling into unconsciousness. In these concluding moments, all of the stylistic elements that have characterised the film, such as the wandering camera eye that lends events a dream-like quality, the crashing guitar chords, the close inspection of the landscape, the clumsy and awkward movement of the protagonist, converge to dramatic effect. The effects of disintegration on Blake’s body have passed into the very form of the film here. Blake’s body becomes lumbering and heavy, mirrored by the camera work that sways dramatically. Furthermore, reflecting the idea of a return to origin, the ending of the film mirrors Blake’s entry into Machine, as though the film’s conclusion answers its beginning, but not in the traditional sense of providing a plot resolution. It is only the extended ritual ceremony that allows Blake to pass from one state to another, and which provides the film’s central conceit, that is resolved at the film’s conclusion.

Significantly, Deleuze (2005: 183) writes of the *genesign*, the image of time that is so pertinent to *Dead Man*, that: 'there...is another cinema-body-thought link...to mount a camera on the body takes on a different sense: it is no longer a matter of following or trailing the everyday body, but of making it pass through a ceremony...of imposing a carnival or masquerade on it which makes it into a grotesque body, but also brings out its gracious and glorious body, until at last the disappearance of the visible body is achieved.' Throughout the film, Blake has experienced the dissolution of his sense of self and has been moulded into other personalities. As a liminal subject, his name has acted as a catalyst for invention and interpretation. It is as though the ordeal that he has suffered has served as a preparation for his journey to the 'other side' and, although we do not see a literal disintegration of his body, it is metaphorically transcribed as he floats off and merges with the horizon. Undoubtedly, this last scene suggests that Blake is going to die shortly, but the film's abiding theme of metamorphosis suggests that this is just one more change of form in an infinite series.



### *Last Days* (2004).

*Last Days* is a creative 'interpretation' of the final twenty-four hours in the life of 'grunge' music icon Kurt Cobain. It is a film that can be read on a number of levels: as a comment on the modern day cult of celebrity; as a meditation on death; and as a study of isolation, liminality and bodily crisis. As an example of the first of these options, it can be seen as a highly unconventional, strategically pared down 'Biopic'; as an example of the second reading, it offers a precise study of a body that is slowing down and disintegrating. However, neither of these readings illuminates several fundamental themes of the film. It is the latter reading that seems not only to compliment most closely Van Sant's formal choices as a director, but also to clarify the central conceit of the film: death as a *becoming* enabled through liminality. As a study of a person who is, in anthropological terms, 'betwixt and between' (Turner 1969: 95), *Last Days* presents a body that is open to a continual course of change and evolution, a path that eventually brings the body closer to the natural world. The film centres on processes rather than psychology; the main character is a figure of *dissolution* rather than *disillusion*. Van Sant complicates death in *Last Days* by presenting it as a course of disintegration and re-incorporation into the natural world rather than a finite event. This reading suggests that the final scene, in which Blake 'leaves' his body, is not one of 'transcendence', but rather another metamorphosis in an endless process of becoming. Life and death are, to use Deleuze and Guatarri's term, *immanent* within this cinematic world: Blake becomes part of his environment through disintegration. As we shall see, like Jarmusch's Blake in *Dead Man* who loses his social identity through the loss of his parents, fiancé and occupation, Van Sant's Blake dies two deaths in *Last Days*;<sup>34</sup> the first death is the disintegration of his fixed, socially defined or public 'self', a disintegration which has already happened at the beginning of the film, while the second death is the 'disappearance' of his 'visible body' (Deleuze 2005: 183), which takes place at the end of the film. According to Deleuze and Guatarri's explanation of this idea in *A Thousand Plateaus* (1988), the first of these deaths can be seen as a positive one as it opens up the path to creation and experimentation;

---

<sup>34</sup> There are a number of striking similarities between the two films; aside from the fact that both the films' protagonists are named Blake, both these films are extended examinations of liminality. Both of these characters spend their time literally stumbling between two deaths, and the inclusion of a campfire scene in *Last Days* strongly echoes a similar scene in *Dead Man*, which arguably suggests that Van Sant is referencing Jarmusch.

they write of this concept: “(o)ne of these is the actual death of the body. The other is the affective “death of the subject” that leads to replenished life. In order to attain “true individuality and acquire a proper name”, a subjective death must be undergone via the “harsh exercise in depersonalisation, opening up to a multiplicity and its intensities, because experimentation on ourselves is our only identity.” (Deleuze and Guatarri in Powell 2007: 83) *Last Days* is essentially a protracted representation of the state of liminality because Blake is between these two deaths and thus, caught in a process of perpetual metamorphosis that renders him thoroughly ambiguous as a protagonist. Indeed, it would be more pertinent to describe Blake as a cinematic construct rather than a psychological being with clearly delineated characteristics.

Blake is a character with whom it is difficult to empathise because he is not a fully-rounded ‘protagonist’ in a traditional narrative, and the viewer is given few insights into his inner emotional world; throughout the film, the viewer remains an observer and cannot penetrate into Blake’s psychology. Indeed, *Last Days* is an anti-psychological film because it demands that its viewers identify with its rhythmic and stylistic processes, rather than with the motivations of the central protagonist. *Last Days* is a deterritorialising experience for the film viewer, then, who can choose to open him/her self up to the possibility of encountering the film as a body of *affects* and not merely as a story ‘based on true events’. It takes what Martine Beugnet (2007: 178), drawing on the theories of Antonin Artaud, calls ‘the third path’. By borrowing effects from purely experimental or abstract film forms, such as a resolute focus on the materiality of the medium or the use of haptic vision that destabilises the viewer’s gaze, and using them in the feature film format, the cinema of the ‘third path’ comes to occupy the area between purely experimental or abstract film and commercial, ‘narrative-based’ cinema. *Last Days*, despite its relation to a somewhat hackneyed cinematic genre and the fact that its central character is based on an icon who seemingly fulfilled all the perennial clichés of the rock and roll lifestyle, is a film that rejects factual detail and psychological analysis in favour of sensory experience and thinking *through* and not *apart* from its images; yet arguably this brings the viewer closer to understanding the film’s iconic subject better than any conventional cinematic treatment could.

### *Crisis and Liminality.*

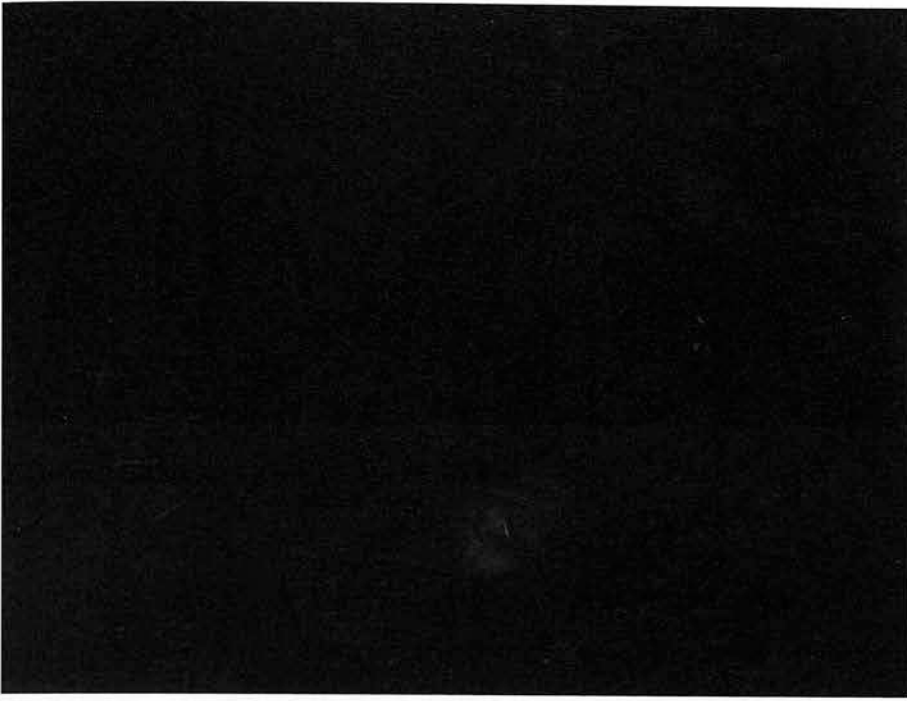
As we have seen, Blake's crisis can be interpreted on three levels: as a crisis of social relations and contemporary values; as a physical crisis that can be linked with Deleuze's notion of 'the seer' (2005: 2); and as a life-crisis in the strictly anthropological use of the term. It is possible to extrapolate from Van Sant's portrayal of Blake's housemates and their interactions with him that the preoccupations of the social world and the relationships formed within it have driven Blake into isolation. These men and women occupy Blake's house and show little regard for his personal welfare; the housemates seem to have set up some kind of provisional commune in his home in an attempt to revive the spirit of the 1960s 'hippie' movement; Turner's description of this latter group certainly seems pertinent in connection with the young men and women in the film. However, what Van Sant shows is a clearly debased, morally bankrupt version of the 'hippie' movement. Turner (1969: 112-13), originally writing of this phenomenon in the 1960s, notes of the 'hippies' and more specifically of the spirit of the 1960s: '(t)hese are the "cool" members of the adolescent and young-adult categories - which do not have the advantages of the national *rites de passage* - who "opt out" of the status-bound social order and acquire the stigmata of the lowly, dressing like "bums", itinerant in their habits, "folk" in their music tastes, and menial in the casual employment they undertake. They stress personal relationships rather than social obligations, and regard sexuality as a polymorphic instrument of immediate *communitas*'. Van Sant references this period through the music to which the housemates listen, such as The Velvet Underground's *Venus In Furs*, an album made in collaboration with counter culture icons, Nico and Andy Warhol. The inclusion of this song serves both to emphasise and highlight the fact that this updated version of an underground culture is somewhat spurious (tellingly, Scott, who is singing along to the song, does not know the exact words), and that this way of life has a dark and pernicious side to it. Indeed, through use of this music, Van Sant invokes memories of the victims of this era, such as Nico and Edie Sedgwick who have subsequently become tragic icons. The culture of which Turner writes was one united in its struggle against governmental bureaucracy, inequality and the war in Vietnam through its shared core values of peace, freedom and love, but Van Sant's updated version of this is shown to be a completely vacuous and ultimately harmful one. Here, community or feeling for one's fellow human beings has been replaced by egocentric behaviour, while the reference to Nico, Warhol and, by extension, Sedgwick, extends to Blake/Cobain as a modern take on these vulnerable characters. However, such a reading is the result of both an interpretation of what cannot even really be said to be 'the narrative' in *Last Days* and the viewer's own knowledge of Kurt Cobain's life. Although it is not erroneous to point out the lack of a communal or generous spirit in the film as Van Sant deliberately visually separates Blake from his housemates, this assessment relies heavily on



extraction from the film's diegetic events and requires the viewer actually to work against the grain of the film by privileging a non-existent plot over its striking visual form.

A second interpretation of *Last Days* that uses Deleuze's delineation of the visual symptoms of crisis in modern cinema, in particular his notion of the 'seer' (2005:2), as a theoretical approach is also possible. From the outset, Blake appears to be undergoing some kind of crisis of health: his body is in a neglected state, his appearance is unkempt and, at the beginning of the film, he appears to be wearing a hospital 'in patient' uniform; his speech is incoherent and unclear; he is seen vomiting and suffers from bouts of narcolepsy throughout the film. Aspects of this crisis are reminiscent of Deleuze's definition of the breakdown of the 'action-image' (2005: 2), in particular 'the form of the trip / ballad' (2005: 3). Like the characters in *Elephant*, Blake's wandering seems to be both aimless and potentially endless, as though it were undertaken for its own sake rather than born out of a specific purpose. In this sense, he also does not act to affect his situation, but rather his situation or environment is something that he endures and drifts through. Action, in the classical sense, is replaced with desultory drifting, while the viewer experiences time in its pure state by observing Blake's itinerant behaviour because his movement is not channelled into the achievement of a specific purpose. A breakdown in Blake's sensory-motor capacities is evidenced in his inability to complete the most basic of tasks, such as walking in a straight line, feeding himself or standing up (he frequently has to grip onto things and falls over). On the rare occasion that he does act in order to complete a particular task, he often fails to do so or goes about things in the wrong order; for example, when pouring some milk and cereal into a bowl, he puts the cereal back into the refrigerator, leaves the milk on the counter and then falls asleep before he has finished his breakfast. The proliferation of purely visual moments in the film, such as when Van Sant chooses to focus in close-up on some shrubbery instead of tracing the movements of his protagonist (who has literally fallen out of the frame some time beforehand), could be seen as examples of Deleuze's optical image that serves no specific purpose in the narrative other than allowing the protagonist and viewer to experience time in a pure state. These images could be tied to Blake's status as a 'seer' rather than a character of action (Deleuze 2005: 2); yet, this interpretation too, does not seem to capture fully the nature of Blake's crisis. He is not someone who is merely unable to act in a logical and interpretable manner through action and reaction, or one who records rather than acts; in fact, he is a character who is beyond this entirely, who is involved in a bodily dialogue or exchange with the world that renders him continually open to fluctuation and metamorphosis and it is his liminal status that facilitates this.

Van Sant frames and films Blake's body, the textures and tactility of his clothes, in the same way he captures the diegetic landscape; this visual strategy serves to heighten rather than alleviate the opacity of the central character. Blake is certainly an integral part of the cinematic environment, but he is not necessarily a 'character' caught up in a 'narrative'. Instead of viewing Blake as an individual who interacts psychologically and emotionally with the world, it seems more useful and appropriate to view him as a cipher through which an atomic exchange between body and landscape is rendered visible; as a liminal character caught between two deaths, he is *becoming-world*. Of course, this is a process, which for Deleuze and Guatarri, we are all continually and inextricably involved in; therefore, what Van Sant presents the viewer with in *Last Days* is actually the inevitable human condition: we are all caught up in a near-invisible, but inexorable process of decay, metamorphosis and re-growth. Van Sant compresses and crystallises this cycle in *Last Days*. Van Sant emphasises visually Blake's immersion in the natural world from the outset; the exchange between body and world has already been initiated by the film's opening. Blake is not introduced through a conventional establishing shot in which his behaviour can be read as immediately comprehensible. Rather, Van Sant, through a travelling long-distance shot in which the foliage is given priority visually over the main protagonist, presents Blake as a body that meanders through a forested landscape; from the outset of the film, it is implied that Blake is a character who has broken away from the social world, who no longer 'exists' through a socially defined role, and is surviving in an area that is associated strongly with liminality. The essence of Blake's crisis lies in his isolation from both the social, hierarchical world and the world of the healthy or living. In other words, *Last Days*, like Jarmusch's *Dead Man*, is an extended study of liminality and one man's movement towards death. Blake can be most accurately described as a liminal or threshold creature. Separated from the social order, he either occupies spaces that are by nature 'betwixt and between', such as passageways, staircases and tunnels, or he is seen in areas, such as the forest, that are not owned by anyone and are separated from social structures (unlike a city). It is often the case that Blake does not even cross thresholds in the earlier part of the film (an act that ritually unifies him with another world), but remains on them and falls into a state of unconsciousness. This emphasises visually Blake's *in-between-ness*: he is not part of one order or another as he is constantly on the verge of evolving into something else. He is inherently a figure of crisis.



**Figure 24:** Opening sequence from *Last Days*.

As we have seen, Victor Turner, developing Van Gennep's model, writes of the attributes of liminal people that they are: 'necessarily ambiguous, since these persons elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space...liminality is frequently likened to death, to being in the womb, to invisibility, to darkness...to the wilderness' (Turner 1969: 95). Blake is an inscrutable character; as a protagonist in a film, his mere presence functions as a non-presence and confounds any assertions the viewer may make about him.<sup>35</sup> His liminal status has been noted implicitly by Amy Taubin (2005: 19) in her review of the film: '(l)ess a character than a construction, Blake pauses on the verge of death to oscillate between fact and fiction, sleep and waking, male and female.' Blake's liminal nature complicates both the viewer's conception of him as a cinematic character and as a fictional representation of Kurt Cobain. The fact that he is between two forms of death and also between life and death is only reinforced all the more by his presence as a sleepwalker in the film; Blake stumbles through the film, a trajectory that is only interrupted by frequent periods of narcolepsy. Sleep, which is akin to unconsciousness and death, is a state into which Blake is constantly on the verge of lapsing – he is neither fully conscious nor fully unconscious throughout the entire film. As he does in *Elephant*, Van Sant also evokes liminality by playing with the borders of the film frame and off-

---

<sup>35</sup> This notion was explored by Todd Haynes in his recent anti-biopic about Bob Dylan, *I'm Not There* (2007). In his film, five different characters, none of which are called Bob Dylan, embody different aspects of the singer's character or stages in his life, yet, ultimately, the 'real' Bob Dylan remains elusive.



screen space; visually, Blake is either continually located close to the periphery of the film frame, as though he were being swallowed up into the unknown (what cannot be shown or represented), or he falls out of the frame so that the camera captures dead space and time in a manner that recalls the work of Michelangelo Antonioni. An example of this is the scene in which Blake returns home after spending the night in the forest: the viewer sees him walk into a greenhouse and out of the film frame so that it is only possible to hear and to guess what he is doing; cut to a mid, low-angled shot of the house in which Blake appears as an indistinct figure holding a long spade in the middle part of the frame; his body twists and falls awkwardly as he tries to walk down a grass verge and stumbles towards the camera; as he gets closer, he suddenly dips out of the frame; the camera pans around to the left taking in the green garden foliage; Blake's incessant murmuring can be heard on the film's sound track, but he is not seen; eventually he appears out of the left hand side of the frame and walks into the background of the shot; Blake starts digging, but his actions are obscured by a mass of twigs in the foreground of the frame. This short sequence is exemplary of the film's visual style; Blake is not privileged over the landscape because he is already a part of it, and he will be seen to merge increasingly with it in the course of the film. He is linked with the role of a gardener throughout the film and is often seen physically working with the earth, something which allies him further with the acts of growing and becoming. Additionally, Blake is also often shown in areas of darkness where only small parts of his body are visible to the viewer; by the film's conclusion, which suitably takes place at dusk, Blake is wearing a pewter-coloured coat and he merges into the dark environment seamlessly. Indeed, in the latter stages of the film, it is often difficult for the film viewer to distinguish Blake from his surroundings; by the film's end Blake is reduced to an indefinite, exiguous and blurred figure wandering through a murky and shadowed landscape into which he slowly dissolves. Furthermore, as a peripatetic figure, Blake is constantly 'between' places in the film and, as we have seen, frequently occupies inherently liminal spaces. These liminal environments, such as doorways and staircases, reflect his status as a character of the threshold, while the travelling camera mirrors his constant motion that is not born out of any specific purpose. Blake is already a ghostly presence at the start of the film as he creeps around his own house and is either ignored or remains unnoticed by his housemates, while his invisibility is heightened by his choice of clothing. It is these qualities of ambiguity that are translated formally – occupation of the margins of the film frame, association with invisibility and darkness, assimilation into the surrounding environment – that mark Blake out increasingly as a liminal character in the film.

Blake's rite of passage is initiated through a number of rites of separation; his first ritually significant act combines the removal of clothing and bathing in a waterfall. Catherine Bell (1997: 36) notes that liminality is often entered via cleansing rituals that are tantamount to separation from one's former social order; she writes: '(t)he first stage, separation, is often marked by rites of purification and symbolic allusions to the loss of the old identity (in effect, death to the old self): the person is bathed, hair is shaved, clothes are switched, marks are made on the body, and so on.' The importance of this cleansing ritual is emphasised both sonically and visually by Van Sant; the gushing sound of the waterfall overpowers any other noise on the soundtrack at this point, while Blake's body bends, flails and almost disappears under the force of the waterfall. Framed in mid-shot, Blake once again appears to be a small figure in a landscape that overwhelms and absorbs human presence. Shortly after this scene, Blake changes into a woman's black nightdress, combs his hair and applies black eyeliner. He changes his clothes two further times after this into outfits of brown, blue and grey, all of which serve as a form of camouflage when he is outside, but it is the first of these costume changes (into women's clothing) that is the most interesting in light of the fact that Blake is in isolation from a social order that creates and upholds certain polarities or categories. As noted earlier, in a liminal zone, binary oppositions, such as 'male' and 'female', no longer apply and the boundaries between gender and hierarchies are effaced so that a process of exchange may be possible. For Deleuze, this progression is always initially facilitated through *becoming-woman*. Tellingly, Turner (1969: 106) notes one of the properties of liminality is the 'minimization of sex distinctions'; the point here is that Blake stands apart from a world that defines things in dualistic terms and ways of thinking so he is neither one thing nor another - he is neither strictly male nor female at this moment; rather, he is involved in a process of becoming that only his liminal status could afford him. Van Sant's presentation of *becoming-woman* in *Last Days* is a positive one because it opens up the *lines of flight* that enable constructive metamorphosis. Blake does not dress as a woman in order to re-appropriate social hierarchies within a liminal zone; rather, his 'queering' of binary oppositions is the first stage in a process that will facilitate the dissolution of all boundaries between 'self'/'other' and 'inside'/'outside'.





**Figure 25: Separation ritual.**

In *Last Days*, the property of sacredness is of particular note with regard to Van Sant's formal approach. Turner comments that sacredness is often viewed as being an inherent quality in liminal personae and areas. As we have seen, as a result of the replacement of social hierarchies with *communitas* in the liminal period, a more 'open' morality exists in contrast to the 'closed' system of norms and regulations that operate in a structured and bounded society. Thus, the liminal person often comes to express what Turner (1969: 111), taking his cue from David Hume, calls 'the sentiment for humanity.' Van Sant hints subtly at his protagonist's link to the iconic figure of Cobain by comparing him with various religious iconographies. However, like Cobain's status as the 'god' of 'grunge' music, Blake's sacred properties do not have any specific religious meaning and are as much a reflection of his liminal status as they are of anything else. It is in the film's final scene that Blake's association with the 'sacred' is conveyed most strongly to the viewer. Blake's 'death' or final transformation occurs in a greenhouse, a place where things grow and morph. As if to mimic the process of becoming, Van Sant's camera draws in very closely to Blake and, for the first time, his face is fully visible to the viewer. By retaining this image until the last section of the film, Van Sant impresses the power and importance of this



moment on the viewer, while his use of the close-up at this moment recalls the strategically-lit and beautified images of Hollywood's 'golden stars', such as Greta Garbo and Marlene Dietrich. This moment takes place during the liminal time zone of twilight; the bluish light from outside the greenhouse, when merged with the stark white light from its interior, creates a halo-like effect around Blake's head. This close-up on his face is very long (over a minute) and both the camera and protagonist are completely still, which contributes stylistically to the tableau-like effect of the shot. By flattening out the image through use of a telephoto lens and using lighting and colouring that recalls saintly iconography, Van Sant refers to Cobain's status as a contemporary iconic figure here. However, Van Sant radically undercuts any notion of saintliness and transcendence through his representation of 'death' as a stage in an infinite process of *becoming*. This is made clear in the final scene of the film in which Blake climbs out of his body. Traditionally, this would be seen as a poetic rendering of 'transcendence', but within the diegetic context, it is the stage in which Blake escapes embodiment and becomes part of the environment. By allying *dying* with *becoming* throughout the film, Van Sant complicates the notion of 'death' as an 'end' point and recasts it as a transformative process. While it is possible to read this as a moment of 'transcendence' within a religious context, it would make more sense, as the world Van Sant creates here is one of metamorphosis, to read it as an example of Deleuze and Guatarri's death of the self that can lead to further joyful and affirmative ways of becoming.<sup>36</sup>

### Thresholds and Becoming.

As we have seen, Blake is a threshold creature, and fittingly he is often seen occupying inherently liminal areas. During these moments, Blake often collapses in a narcoleptic stupor exactly on the boundary between a doorway and a room, or at the end of a corridor leading into a room. The formally unusual presentation of space and time in these scenes helps to foreground the significance of thresholds in the film; the link between moments of crisis and thresholds in the film is reminiscent of Bakhtin's work, as outlined earlier with relation to Van Sant's *Elephant*, on the 'chronotope' or literally time-space. Again, it is Bakhtin's observation of the relationship

---

<sup>36</sup> Indeed, following Deleuze's interpretation of Nietzsche and the concept of 'eternal return' (Deleuze 1983), one could argue that Blake is caught up in a cyclical process in which the 'self' is undone through the continual return of difference<sup>36</sup>. What returns, for Deleuze (1983: 48), is *difference*: '(w)hat is the being of that which becomes, of that which neither starts nor finishes becoming? *Returning is the being of that which becomes.*' This is to say that, if we follow this reading, the presentation Van Sant offers us suggests that Blake will perpetually *become-other*, unendingly return in *difference*.

between time, space and moments of crisis in the novels of Dostoevsky that seems especially pertinent. He notes that Dostoevsky's novels centre on moments of bifurcation: 'the breaking point of a life, the moment of crisis, the decision that changes a life.' (Holquist 1981: 248) Bakhtin refers to Dostoevsky's presentation of time-space as the 'chronotope of threshold' (Holquist 1981: 248); during these moments time becomes: 'instantaneous; it is as if it has no duration and falls out of the normal course of biographical time.' (Holquist 1981: 248) Time is no longer subject to the restraints of chronology and cause and effect, while space in turn also changes and becomes 'charged and responsive to the movements of time' (Bakhtin: 1981, 84). In *Last Days* moments of crisis take place in ritually significant areas (under arches or in doorways). As we know, a threshold marks out the transition between two stages in the ritual process; thus to remain on a threshold is to stay inherently between things, to be neither here nor there, *to be liminal*. Two scenes that take place relatively early on in the film establish visually, sonically and temporally the links between crisis, thresholds and liminality. In a slow tracking shot, Blake walks down a corridor towards a bedroom, passes under an archway and stops just inside the boundary of a doorway; he turns sideways; seen in profile, he slowly bends down to put a bowl of cereal he is carrying on the floor; as he tries to stand up, his body crumples lethargically and falls backwards, as though in slow motion, onto the bed behind him. A number of visual and sonic elements help to make this scene especially eerie or seemingly other-worldly. Firstly, Blake is framed so that he appears to be boxed in by two open doorways on either side of him; these doorways resemble more closely two dark holes on the periphery of the film frame and function as porous and ominous spaces into which Blake seems in danger of disappearing. The light from the bedroom at the end of the corridor visually suggests that he is walking down a long tunnel towards a bright light, an image which is often used to connote the experience of being near to death. Secondly, his body tilts towards the left of the frame as though he is being pulled involuntarily towards its edges and absorbed into this 'unknown' area beyond. Although, he spends a short amount of time in this corridor, his body is presented visually as a grainy cipher that is pulled towards its decaying environment, an effect partly wrought by the natural low light of this particular moment in the scene. There are also several other frames within the cinematic frame itself: the main corridor, the portico at the end of the corridor that provides the entrance to the bedroom, and two open doorways and their arcs on either side of the frame. The effect of this re-framing within the frame is to intensify the themes of transition and passage that the film repeatedly foregrounds. In addition to these striking visual elements, Hildegard Westerkamp's *concrète* score of church bells and chanting congregations of people compounds the effect of this strange presentation of space that is almost tactile in quality due to its darkness and graininess.



The fact that Blake is seen falling asleep on the threshold of the doorway, while Westerkamp's score prominently features the sound of several chiming clocks that are slowed-down and distorted, also suggests that the presentation of time during these threshold moments is not subject to the rational processes of cause and effect that are associated with classical cinema. Rather, time as the force of change and difference, is what comes through here as a disruptive element in the cinematic presentation; mirroring Blake's status as a somnambulist, the viewer begins to *feel* as though he/she were falling out of time too. The abandonment of chronological time will be emphasised even further by Van Sant's use of three time-loops in the film that serve to disorientate the viewer and prevent him/her from piecing together the onscreen events in a rational order.



**Figure 26: Disintegration.**

The second of these scenes of 'threshold' occurs tellingly after Blake has undergone another physical transformation by putting on a woman's negligee and lining his eyes with black kohl. It is as though each of these occasions precipitates a physical change within him; in other words, these moments help to expedite his *becoming-other*. Again, he is seen walking between two



archways towards another room; once inside, his body is seen slowly, and quite gracefully, collapsing onto the floor; he falls onto his hands and knees and resembles an animal; he crawls towards the living room doorway and falls into unconsciousness. This scene is shown twice in the film, once from inside the living room and once from outside the living room from the perspective of Asia, one of the female housemates. Once again, the presentation of this moment is visually and aurally striking. As Blake approaches the living room, he is seen coming out of an archway on the left-hand corner of the screen. The camera is positioned inside the open doorway; thus, Blake is seen caught between two archways, which creates visually the effect of a tunnel; the area between these two doorframes is enveloped in darkness and Blake is seemingly absorbed into this encroaching blackness so that he is only partially visible to the viewer. Blake's body veers off towards the left-hand side of the frame and is partly obscured by the left partition of the living room's folding doors; this sequence connotes visually that Blake is gradually stumbling into invisibility and, by extension, disintegration and death. Indeed, these moments of threshold crystallise the process of *becoming* that Blake undergoes throughout the film. Again, there are a number of re-framings in this scene: the film frame itself; a piece of cornicing that forms an arch in the middle of the room; and the window in the background of the frame, which itself is divided into five sections by means of a frame. Whilst being visually set against this background, Blake walks over to the television and turns it on to MTV on which a 'Boyz II Men' song called *On Bended Knee* is playing. He walks back from the television so that he is parallel to the window; seen in profile, his body crumples very slowly, in a controlled and rather elegant movement, onto the floor and he ends up crawling on his hands and knees like a hybrid of a human being and an animal; he crawls very slowly towards the edge of the frame and his body is gradually absorbed, once again, into invisibility. During this sequence, the sound of the pop song has blended with Westerkamp's score so that kitsch manufactured noise, the sounds of chanting, distorted bell chimes, doors opening and closing and a droning foghorn-like tone are all heard together. The camera then cuts to focus in close-up on the pop video in which the band are gesticulating in a rather melodramatic fashion; however, despite the comic incongruity between what appears on the television screen and what is happening in the diegetic world, the viewer's eye is drawn towards the middle section of the television screen where a reflection of the living room window can be seen. This creates the effect of a passageway with light at its end that is contained within the screen. As the camera focuses in on the television, the music video begins to seem like an abstract play of shapes and colours to the viewer. Just as Westerkamp's score merges with the Boyz II Men song to eerie effect, the video also becomes a confluence of movements and indefinite shapes through this re-framing. What seems initially prosaic here

actually reflects the fluctuations and passage of the central protagonist. In both of these aforementioned scenes, as Blake stands on a threshold, space becomes extended, ominous and porous, as though it could absorb him, and time is no longer chronological (indeed, as mentioned before, the latter scene is played twice through a time-loop). Time becomes elastic as evidenced through Blake's controlled and slowed down movements; the chronological time of classical film that measures the movements of an active protagonist is replaced here with time as a disruptive force through which the figure of a sleepwalker stumbles.



**Figure 27: Another path.**

It is Blake's liminal status that affords the possibility of his *becoming-woman-animal-environment*, a process that evolves throughout the film. As we have seen, Deleuze's *genesign* is an image in which the self is distilled into a series of movements and gestures that throws into crisis the notion that identity is a stable, cohesive and enduring entity. The *genesign* is as a useful theoretical tool for mapping Blake's progression in *Last Days*. As noted earlier with reference to *Dead Man*, the *genesign* is inherently tied to the powers of 'the false' (Deleuze 2005: 133). Deleuze writes of the effect of 'the power of the false' on characterisation: 'contrary to the form of the true which



is unifying and tends towards the identification of a character (his discovery or simply his coherence), the power of the false cannot be separated from an irreducible multiplicity. “I is another” has replaced Ego = Ego.’ (Deleuze 2005: 129) *Last Days* calls into question biographical accounts of Kurt Cobain’s life by simply showing the viewer a man in extreme crisis who merely resembles the iconic musician. In Deleuzian terms, Blake’s journey between his social death and his actual death is the path to *becoming* which, as we have seen, according to Deleuze and Guatarri, is facilitated initially through a *becoming-woman*; Blake is given freedom through his social death that removes him from any established identity and, through his liminality, the demands of the socially stratified world. By eventually being consumed in *becoming-world*, he reaches his physical death, but this is not the final stage of his journey because the film complicates death through the notion of becoming; thus death is likened to another point in a trajectory of decomposition and renewal in the film. Blake becomes woman and animal in the film, but this does not mean that he literally is a woman or an animal for part of the film’s duration. As we have seen, according to Deleuze and Guatarri (1988: 275), it is not a question of ‘imitating this entity or even transforming oneself into it’ but of entering into a ‘zone of proximity’ so that a mutual exchange can take place. ‘Blake’ functions as the meeting point where binary oppositions dissolve in *Last Days*. Likewise, although Blake is likened to a feral dog (an effect also wrought by his dishevelled appearance), and his singing is aurally closer to howling (indeed, his voice is answered by a dog/wolf when he is singing in the forest), this metamorphosis is but one stage in a process of mutation that allows him to move away from the social world and any sense of a fixed identity. While it seems that Blake embodies a very literal translation of *becoming-woman* and *becoming-animal*, these metamorphoses actually signal the first stages of, and allow for, a *becoming-world*, through which Blake’s bodily disintegration and actual death is achieved.

From the outset of *Last Days*, Blake’s presence in the diegetic world is marked out by the sounds of his body moving through his environment; these sounds are registered in the opening sequence through the prominent crunching of the leaves beneath his feet and the thudding sound of his body as it falls down a slope towards the pool and waterfall. The importance of this exchange between self and world is emphasised from the start by Van Sant. The bathing scene that follows on from the opening travelling shot, as detailed earlier, suggests further the process of *becoming* that is at work between the protagonist and the environment; Blake is seen taking his clothes off before diving into the water. While he is standing in the stream, the force of the water is shown by the impact it has on his frail body that bends and stumbles towards the camera; he is then seen urinating into the river and, later, drinking from it. A literal exchange of fluids between



the protagonist and his surroundings takes place, which acts as a metaphorical extension of the wider process at play in the film. The state of Blake's house/castle also mirrors his decaying and fragile body;<sup>37</sup> when the film's events shift from the forest to the castle, the first interior shot is almost an abstract still in which an ill-defined pink surface fills half of the screen and its top half is occupied by a yellow facade that is partially covered in peeling white paint. Van Sant often chooses to focus on an environment that Blake then enters into so that the diegetic world literally pre-exists and outlasts him, and it is these surroundings that he becomes a part of.

Already in this early stage of the film, Van Sant suggests Blake's kinship with the natural world and its processes of decay and re-growth, and thus he re-casts death as a mode within this.

Although this haptic image is eventually brought into focus as a kitchen surface and wall, this brief moment of hapticity that foregrounds textures and colours over easily identifiable objects acts as a *mise en abyme* for the whole film. *Last Days* is a film that brings its protagonist into a bodily dialogue with the world through a process of exchange, metamorphosis and renewal; by extension, it also requires the viewer to experience the film in a more directly visceral manner in order to feel its full impact.

In Deleuzian terms, by becoming-minor, Blake is heading towards the creation of a 'Body without Organs' (Deleuze and Guatarri: 2004 257-341). This contentious term is used to illustrate what the 'immanent end of becoming' (Deleuze and Guatarri 1988: 279) might be like.

Patricia Pisters (2003: 112) notes that this is the state that all becomings head towards:

'Becoming-Woman is fundamentally a question of transforming and liberating the body and desire in multiple ways; it is the beginning of the creation of a Body without Organs'. This term does not refer literally to an eviscerated body but rather, one that is opposed to the organising principles of any established way of life, institution or entrenched way of thinking. Deleuze and Guatarri (2004: 175) write: 'The BwO is opposed not to the organs but to that organization of the organs called the organism.' This is to say that what the *Body without Organs* counteracts is the *limitations* of any cohesive, self-contained body. The *Body without Organs* is one that is able to open itself out towards a multiplicity of forces and intensities and, in doing so, enables a perpetual process of change and evolution. One could argue that Blake, in connection with his environment and the act of music-making, forms a collective *Body without Organs*. He becomes a site traversed by various intensities, such as sounds, smells, sights and textures that intermingle

---

<sup>37</sup> When walking around Blake's house, an unknown character, who seems to be a private investigator, picks up an ornament and notes its state of decay by saying: 'this is eventually going to crystallise and implode.' This statement seems equally true of Blake as it does of the state of his house.

and form a web of connections. This ability to feel a multiplicity of affects can be linked to a virtual state of the body that pre-exists any notion of a sharply delineated sense of self. In Deleuzian terms, what the camera captures in *Last Days* would be: 'the body before discourses, before words, before things are named.' (Deleuze 2005: 167). What we are given in this film is the *potential* state of the body to become through an infinite series of connections. Again, Pisters (2003: 110) comments pertinently of this principle: 'one could say that the Body without Organs is the zero degree of the body, where every body part has its potential: "a thousand tiny sexes" that on a molecular level can make infinite connections. These combinations can be made not only between different human bodies but also in relation to plants, animals and other "bodies".' It is precisely this exchange between the human body, plant and animal that is at play in *Last Days*.

A scene in which Blake makes music, captured through one continuous long tracking shot, translates visually *becoming* and the creation of a *Body without Organs* in the film. In this sequence, the movement of the camera, that of the surrounding natural environment and the primal sounds of Blake's guitar, voice and drums all converge to dramatic effect. This soundscape seems to emanate from a single electrical note of low frequency that builds into a cacophony of sound that compliments the backtracking momentum of the camera and the movement of nature. Initially, one can only hear the drone of Blake's guitar amplifier and this sound seems to set off the movement of the camera away from the castle's windows; the camera registers progressively Blake's activity within the building, setting this within the wider context of his environment. Blake starts to play a simple and repetitive refrain on an electric guitar; however, we can only assume that this music is emanating from his activity because we see him pick up the guitar, but once he starts playing his whole body is blocked out by the wooden partition of the window and his head is hidden from view by his hair and a lampshade. By the time the second guitar comes in with crashing minor chords, the camera has captured the undulating movement of the trees' leaves in the wind, which is reflected on the castle's glass window panes, and the movements of the natural world. This is then followed by the introduction of a man's voice that sounds closer to screaming than singing, but we do not see Blake at all during this moment in the scene. Finally, Blake is seen playing the drums accompanied by the now continuous and looped instrumentation that has gradually built up during the sequence. Logically, the viewer will attribute all of these sounds to Blake and the technical equipment that allows him to create the sound of a full rock band by himself. However, if one were simply to observe the manner in which the scene is played out, a quite different reading is possible. The effect of the different



sounds being produced independently of one another that blend into an all-encompassing soundscape is one of *becoming*. Often, because Blake is not visible to the viewer, these sounds seem to be acousmatic or possibly emanating from the castle itself. Furthermore, this is not the kind of musical piece that seems to dissolve and resolve through conventional chordal progression; rather, the whole body of sound has no predictable direction and its shifts in tone are not classical. The seamless movement of the camera, which is not interrupted by any editing strategies, and the flowing movement of the natural world around the castle converge so as to create an effect of duration and *becoming*. All of these different elements – the sounds and the movement of the protagonist, the camera and nature - intertwine in a continual stream of motion. This joint movement mirrors, perhaps, Blake’s own *detritorialisation* and his return to an originary plane of *becoming*.



**Figure 28: Becoming through music.**

Hildegard Westerkamp’s concrète score reflects and compliments Blake’s encounter with the environment. In her essay *Soundwalking* (Westerkamp: 2001), Westerkamp writes of the sonic dialogue that exists between a human being and his/her environment and how modern lifestyles



and urban-dwelling have caused us to jettison an aural connection with our world in favour of a purely visual one. She notes: '(i)n urban life...close contact with nature tends to be highly reduced. Nature ceases to be a companion with whom one lives and struggles day after day, and becomes instead a distant friend whom one likes to visit on occasion. *Going for a walk* is one way by which urban people attempt to regain contact with nature. When *going for a walk* is replaced by *going for a drive*...our contact with nature becomes purely visual' In the context of this philosophy that inspires Westerkamp's compositions, it is notable that a large portion of *Last Days* is devoted to following Blake as he walks through his environment or sits and looks at the natural world.<sup>38</sup> In these scenes, prominence is given to the sound of the diegetic landscape and, in particular, the sounds of his body interacting with it, as demonstrated in the film's opening scene where the spectator can hear the noises of crunching leaves and twigs beneath his feet more prominently than his monologue. Westerkamp (2001) writes that: 'with your voice or your footsteps...you are "talking" to your environment which then in turn responds by giving your sounds a specific acoustic quality.' The link Westerkamp makes between walking in a non-urban environment and re-connecting with the world can be usefully applied to the state of liminality during which the neophyte is taken out of the social, organised world and placed in an environment, such as a forest. It is in this liminal period that a more immediate relationship can be formed with one's habitat. Likewise, Blake's liminal status, although it divests him of personal characteristics, helps him to open up to his environment. I would argue that Deleuze's description of *becoming* in which one has to 'enter' into a 'relationship' of 'movement and rest', or a 'zone of proximity' (Deleuze and Guatarri 1988: 275) with another entity so that it is possible to exchange particles in a process of endless mutation shares similarities with Westerkamp's description of her compositions. According to her, there is a dialogue between one's body and one's environment effected on a primordial level by which one affects the surrounding environment and it, in turn, affects the human body.<sup>39</sup> This co-mingling of the body with nature is part of the process of *becoming* that Blake is involved in that allows him to mutate continually and eventually achieve something like the 'disappearance of the visible body' (Deleuze 2005: 183) that Deleuze writes of in *Cinema-2*.

---

<sup>38</sup> Chris Chang (2005) originally notes the connection between Westerkamp's article and *Last Days* in his critique of the film 'Guided By Voices'.

<sup>39</sup> A fruitful link could be made with Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology here, in particular his description of the intentional arc that allows for an intrinsic connection between the human body and its environment, which all later abstract and scientific thought sometimes overlooks. However, Deleuze and Merleau-Ponty's philosophies are fundamentally at odds over the issue of perspective. Merleau-Ponty starts with the premise that this perspective is an inescapably embodied one that informs our encounters with the world from the outset, where as Deleuze, inspired by Spinoza's monism, challenges his readers to try to think beyond this embodied perspective towards a plane of immanence from which all life springs. See Merleau-Ponty (1962: 214).

Blake's *becoming-nature* or *becoming-world* has already started at the outset of the film and, by its close, this immersion is almost complete. At this final stage, Blake has changed into an outfit that is predominantly made up of dark shades and is wearing sunglasses; not only is he 'hidden' from the viewer, but he also deliberately hides himself from the world. Blake has passed the point of being a social figure or even being an individual in an environment, because he has seemingly *become* this environment. Although his clothes render this idea figuratively because he is no longer someone who sees or wants to be seen, it is also manifest in the visual style of these final scenes. Blake's clothing acts as a form of camouflage and he merges with the darkness of his surroundings; indeed, it is particularly difficult in this section to pick Blake out from his environment. When filmed from the back, the bulky quality of his coat makes him look like an indefinite figure or a dark expanse on screen that seeps into the blue outline surrounding him; when filmed from the front, his face is completely obliterated by the hood of his coat. The final tracking shot that shows Blake walking back to his house from a music club, which mirrors his walk back from the forest at the film's opening and thus foregrounds his progression, shows him passing through several tunnels. The areas at the periphery of the film frame are, once again, almost entirely black and Blake often merges with this seemingly porous environment. As has been noted, the place that Blake ends his journey, and makes his final transformation by leaving his body, is a greenhouse. The greenhouse is also a liminal area that is between his house and nature's expanse as well as being the place where things grow, evolve and mutate. Fittingly, Van Sant does not suggest that the cause of Blake's death is suicide, as he is simply found dead by the gardener the next morning; his body has noticeably disintegrated over the length of the film, but it is not clear that Blake is a character who wishes to take his own life. Van Sant acknowledges this ambiguity and points out that, rather than presenting a character whose end is death by his own hand, Blake is a character who is dissolving into his environment; he states that what the film portrays is: 'an unwinding of his [Blake's] life' (Feinstein 2005: 2). The main protagonist may die at the end of the film, but his death results in another transformation that could potentially lead to further mutation and growth. Thus, Blake's death seems natural in the context of the film as the final result of a distillation process that has brought him closer to nature through processes of exchange and metamorphosis; by the end of the film, Blake has escaped his body and *become* his environment. Yet, this is a highly unconventional conclusion to a film that is seemingly posited as a 'Biopic' and, in turn, raises questions about the spectator's own encounter with the film.

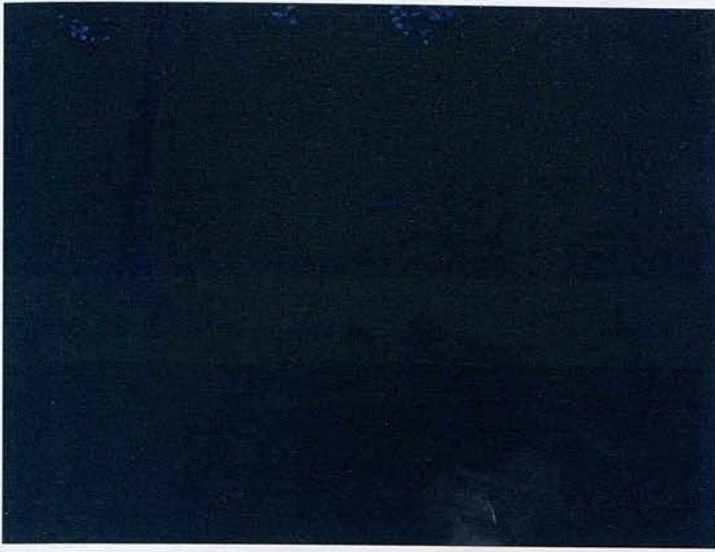


Figure 29: Becoming-nature.



Figure 30: Leaving the body.

Becoming With Film.

*Last Days* has a very tenuous link to the Biopic genre as it fulfils hardly any of its established criteria. It does not relate the story of the main events in the protagonist’s life and, instead, focuses on the last twenty-four hours of his existence. It neither delivers any insights into his character or motivation, nor elaborates on why Blake has ended up in this situation. Although Blake strongly resembles Cobain, little else in the film clearly links him to the musician. Blake is part of a wider cinematic landscape that is conveyed through rhythms, speeds, sounds and



colours; it is Blake's immersion in this world that the viewer has to surrender him/herself to, rather than try to respond to the film in the manner he/she would when watching a more conventional treatment of such a subject. It is only by doing this that the spectator begins to understand what sort of a film *Last Days* really is. This requires the audience to cross a kind of threshold too alongside Blake, and thus, to identify with the course of change that he is going through, rather than judging it as a representation from afar. By taking this unusual route, Van Sant opens up the idea of what constitutes a 'Biopic' and avoids some of the clichés that have come to be associated with it, such as a highly developed dialogue that is constructed to inform the viewer and aid his/her ability to judge the characters.

*Last Days* takes, as we have seen, what Martine Beugnet (2007: 178), following Artaud, calls 'the third path'; films of this sort occupy a territory between the rigidly designated zones of commercial cinema and purely abstract film and adopt techniques normally associated with avant-garde movements for use within the feature film format. These effects often function within a film to deconstruct notions such as identity, gender or to question grand narratives. These formal properties bring the viewer into greater proximity with the events on screen so that it is more difficult for him/her to maintain a distance from the film through what Beugnet (2007: 65) calls a 'detached, objectifying gaze'.<sup>40</sup> *Last Days* affords the viewer the opportunity to open him/herself up to a new kind of viewing experience in which one knowingly engages corporeally with the film in order to identify not with the 'body' of a character, but rather with the 'body' of the film itself. Beugnet (2007: 3) writes of the benefits of this change in viewing strategy that: 'to open oneself to sensory awareness and let oneself be physically affected by an art work... is to relinquish the will to gain full mastery over it, choosing intensity and chaos over rational detachment.' As a visual experience, *Last Days* asks its viewer to take note of textures, movements, speeds and colours over personal or psychological details; it also demands that the viewer abandon the search for narrative meaning or momentum. The film's meditative pacing, its camera work that possess a floating quality and its unusual *concrète* score combine to throw the viewer's senses off balance. Van Sant creates a cinematic world that demands to be felt rather than judged and understood. As Beugnet (2007: 68) notes, a cinema of the senses requires the viewer to identify with the 'film as event' rather than 'characters caught in a plot development'. Likewise, Deleuze (2005: 134) comments that in a cinema of time: 'the very possibility of

---

<sup>40</sup> This idea is reflective of the Cartesian subject who, distrustful of the senses, stands back from the world in judgment so as to abstract only what is necessarily true of something.

judging...is called into question...it is as if there is no truth any more, but only appearances'. What the viewer sees in *Last Days* is mutable appearance; Blake is but one changing figure in a landscape of metamorphosis where notions such as being and stability are jettisoned in favour of *becoming* and change. Beugnet (2007: 65) notes that in a cinema of the senses, sounds and images: 'often ebb and flow between the figurative and the abstract, and...the human form, at least as a unified entity, easily loses its function as the main point of reference.' In *Last Days*, images are highly textural and seem porous, while the soundtrack is made up of recognisable but warped noises as well as inchoate sounds that challenge and confuse the viewer/listener. Additionally, the eye through which the spectator sees this changing landscape through is not a locatable or identifiable character; rather, this 'eye' reflects Deleuze's description of the cinematic spiritual automaton (2005: 161) that opens up a new way of seeing for the film viewer, which, for Deleuze, is a new way of *thinking through* film. Instead of confirming the ideas the viewer may bring to the film about its biographical link to Kurt Cobain by fulfilling the pre-determined tropes of the Biopic, Van Sant offers him/her a radically different experience from the one he/she might have expected; yet, this requires the viewer to identify *with* the film and to think *through* it instead of applying principles *to* it. The unusual relationship between the sound and visual tracks, as discussed earlier with reference to *Elephant* (2003), plays a crucial role in creating this new relationship between the film viewer and the film itself.

As we have seen, Deleuze (2005: 250) notes that one of the defining aspects of the modern cinema of the time-image is the relationship between the sound and visual track; although they seem to be unrelated, they inform each other through a complex process of exchange so that: '(w)hat speech utters is also the invisible that sight sees only through clairvoyance; and what sight sees is the unutterable uttered by speech.' The twisted and warped sounds of Westerkamp's score compliment the decaying state of both Blake's body and his environment, but in a manner that unsettles the viewer; the sound of distorted chiming of clocks presents aurally time's presence as that which disrupts and ushers in, to use Deleuze's term, the 'outside' (2005: 174), of thought. The spectator is forced to see, hear and think anew in order to go *beyond* the clichés that are now so inherent in the Biopic. By forming an embodied connection with the film as a material event that is composed of textures, colours, movements and sounds, the viewer can identify with the rhythm of *becoming* and begin to experience the dissolution of boundaries between self, other and world that Blake also undergoes, despite not being able to identify with him as a psychologically rounded character with clear motivations. Ironically, this more visceral form of identification allows the viewer to get closer to the central protagonist than he/she

would by watching a more conventional treatment of his story. It may even offer the audience a deeper understanding of Cobain than they would have had otherwise. As he did in *Elephant*, Van Sant leaves questions unanswered at the end of *Last Days*. The penultimate scene with the housemates shows them watching the actual news coverage of Cobain's death and worrying that they will be implicated in the incident. Tellingly, this scene takes place straight after the visually poetic sequence in which Blake leaves his corpse and, through its sharp contrast with this scene, functions bathetically. The comparative silence of the previous scene is sharply offset by the inconsequential and rapid speech that emanates from the television set, a sound that verges on being a senseless cacophony. Through this comparison, Van Sant seems to be emphasising the redundant nature of this conjecture; by contrast, his representation of Blake's/ Cobain's death is recast as part of an intricate passage through liminality. Ultimately, one might argue, *Last Days* is a more fitting and respectful tribute to Cobain for this.



**Life-Crisis:** *Lost in Translation* (2004), *Broken Flowers* (2005).

Sofia Coppola's *Lost in Translation* and Jim Jarmusch's *Broken Flowers* examine, broadly speaking, a kind of crisis experienced relating to the direction of one's existence. Fundamentally, the characters in these films are faced with choices that force them to question the ways in which their sense of self and relation to the world is defined. As such, then, there is no specific rite of passage at stake in these two films; rather the films explore loosely the theme of crisis. Here, crisis has as much to do with definitions imposed on the self by others, as it has to do with the literal state of crisis brought about by any rite of passage (in this case through the experience of tourism or road travel). What is sought here is a *line of flight* away from the world of stereotypes or clichés through which one can re-discover the possibilities that *this* world has to offer. Both films initially present the viewer with a situation of existential crisis in which, like the Deleuzian modern protagonist, the world looks to us 'like a bad film' (Deleuze 2005: 166); however, both films also offer as a kind of solution to this desperate situation a choice to believe in *this* world and the body. While both films foreground the absurdity of human existence, they also reveal its potentialities. In the final section of 'Cinema-2: The Time-Image', Deleuze (2005:166) states that modern cinema must film 'belief in this world' because it is only belief that can re-establish the link between man and the world and all of its possibility; I argue that these two films do precisely this because they offer the viewer images of crisis resolved through the restoration of a connection to *this* world rather than a transcendent or ideal one.

*Lost In Translation (2004).*

Coppola's *Lost In Translation* centres on a platonic relationship formed between two Americans who meet during a short visit to Tokyo. Bob Harris is an aging actor who made his name through 'action' films; he is in Tokyo to shoot promotional footage for Suntory whiskey, with whom he has a two-million-dollar contract. Bob's formerly happy marriage seems to have become an acrimonious union; his only contact with his wife, Lydia, during his stay is through sarcastically worded facsimile and answer-machine messages and telephone conversations. Charlotte is a recent graduate in philosophy from Yale and is newly married. She is accompanying her husband, John, a photographer who has travelled to Japan on business. Charlotte spends a lot of time on her own and wonders about her purpose or role in life; her manner is detached and she frequently seems appalled by the people around her. By contrast, John is positive and sociable. Neither Charlotte nor Bob can sleep and meet in the hotel bar one night; they bond over their mutual disillusionment with life and status as outsiders in a culture that is alien to them. Together they embark tentatively on a series of random excursions into Tokyo that act as catalysts for *detritorialisation*, discovery and renewal of the self. Although these themes are somewhat hackneyed, Coppola manages to convey these notions in a visually stimulating manner that eschews narrative conventions of cause and effect. The protagonists' experience as foreigners in Japan merely acts as a metaphor for the wider theme of alienation from self, other and world that is the film's main preoccupation. Rather than simply portraying Tokyo as a specific place overlaid by cultural stereotypes and recycled images from previous representations of this culture (which Coppola, in part, does do), the city also becomes a site of *affects* - speeds, colours, textures and sounds - that helps to remind the protagonists, and by extension the cinematic spectator, of life's richness, fluidity and possibility.

Bob and Charlotte, like ritual subjects undergoing a rite of passage, are *detritorialised* by being removed from their country, their usual routines and habits. The tourist experience is not amongst the life-crises that Van Gennep identifies as being ritualised events; however, the separation of a subject from his/her own territory, his/her placement in a foreign environment where habits and routines have to be abandoned and his/her identity is, to some extent, thrown into crisis, and the changed subject's re-incorporation into a familiar environment, strongly



echoes the tripartite pattern of this ritual process. Contemporary anthropologists have examined the tourist experience as a quasi rite of passage or modern day form of pilgrimage.<sup>41</sup> Nelson H. Graburn, in his article, 'Tourism: The Sacred Journey' states: '(t)ourism is a special form of play involving travel, or getting away from 'it all' (work and home), affording relaxation from tensions, and for some, the opportunity to temporarily become a nonentity.' (Graburn in Smith 1978: 18) The possibility of 'becoming a nonentity' that the tourist experience affords is particularly similar to the ambiguity brought about through liminality. Charlotte and Bob are both going through an existential crisis, a state that is compounded by their status as 'foreigners' in Japan. However, this state of being 'betwixt and between' also ensures that they are removed from the expectations of their own society, while their foreign status prevents them from being absorbed into Japanese culture. Thus, they exist in an ambiguous zone where they are neither restricted by the constraints of their own society, nor expected to comply with those of Japanese culture. Tokyo becomes a playground in which they learn to experiment and re-discover life's richness as a source of stimulation and renewal; it is also the place where they discover life's potential, and by extension, their own. I would argue that, in particular, they learn that it is possible to dismantle the boundaries and definitions against which they struggle at the beginning of the film. Amy Murphy (2006: 41) notes aptly of this theme in *Lost In Translation* that the city becomes a site where it is possible to: 'defy the very structures that define both the city and ourselves.' Coppola transforms Tokyo into a site for *becoming*, a place where it is possible to challenge notions of the fixed, stable self and embrace improvisation and creation.<sup>42</sup>

### *Crisis, Disillusionment and Identity.*

The protagonists' existing states of disassociation and disillusionment are only exacerbated by their experience as foreigners. However, the Japanese backdrop, which shows the local population going about daily business and remaining impervious to foreigners, throws into sharp

---

<sup>41</sup> Recent anthropological studies on the tourist experience are Graburn (in Smith 1978: 18) and Selwyn (in Seaton 1994). Graburn specifically examines the tourism as a form of rite of passage; Selwyn examines tourism from a mainly economic/political context in which he details the tourist experience as a search for 'authenticity' through experience of the 'other'. Other useful studies on this subject are by Burns (1999) and Williams (2004).

<sup>42</sup> A number of recent American films, such as Wes Anderson's *The Darjeeling Limited* (2007) and Woody Allen's *Vicky Cristina Barcelona* (2008), have used foreign locations and cultures as a functional element within a narrative about self-discovery. Usually in such films, the 'foreign' is visually transformed into the 'exotic' and used as a backdrop to offset the re-discovery and affirmation of, in particular, American identity. At the time of the film's release, Coppola was criticised vehemently for her representation of Japanese people and culture on exactly these grounds. Japanese culture does not exist in itself here; rather, it is exoticised or 'dressed-up' and acts as the counterpart to a troubled, but strongly established identity (American-ness). Coppola unwittingly reinforces American identity through tropes of foreignness, alienation and via her two central characters. However, while Coppola's presentation of Japan and the Japanese is undoubtedly problematic, an appraisal of the film through an Orientalist approach is not within the scope of my reading of the film. For such a reading see Sakimoto (2008).

relief the ridiculous mannerisms and idle chatter of the American characters; it is really their own culture that Bob and Charlotte seem to be unable to comprehend. Again, Deleuze's words on the condition of the modern cinematic protagonist seem to be especially pertinent: '(t)he modern fact is that we no longer believe in this world. We do not even believe in the events that happen to us, love, death, as if they only half concerned us. It is not we who make cinema; it is the world which looks to us like a bad film.' (2005: 166) Coppola's representation of 'America' in the film relies and plays on the most pejorative portrayals of American culture in contemporary cinema; she knowingly uses certain stereotypes, such as the 'dumb blonde', in order to tap into the viewer's pre-formed cultural assumptions. While it is American culture that seems to be lambasted most severely in the film, Japanese culture fares only marginally better as it also serves as a mere foil that helps to reveal the existential turmoil of the central protagonists. Ultimately, 'cultural' identity is used to illuminate personal identity, while the crisis of American culture is reflected in the central characters' own difficulties to establish a sense of selfhood.

Charlotte's crisis is portrayed in a manner that is reminiscent of Deleuze's delineation of the break between the cinemas of action and time and its visual and narrative symptoms, which, as we have seen, are: 'the form of the trip / ballad, the multiplication of clichés, the events that hardly concern those they happen to.' (2005: 3) Charlotte's experience of such a 'trip' or 'ballad' is occasioned by her status as a tourist in a place that is culturally and geographically unknown to her; at the beginning of the film, she is frequently seen wandering the streets of Tokyo looking lost and awe-struck. Her inability to connect spaces together in order to find her way around is but a symptom of a more extensive incapacity to comprehend her own emotions and to find a place for herself in the world: 'she [Charlotte] appears to have trouble recognising herself, a representation of her knowledge of the world. Her attempts at communication fail – she is unable to transform feelings into words in reaction to experiences.' (Felicity Colman in Stivale 2005: 151) In a short sequence set in Tokyo's underground system, through a set of uncharacteristically brief takes, Coppola conveys Charlotte's confusion and sense of displacement to the viewer. The first shot shows her looking at a map of the underground; her hand rests on her chin as though in contemplation, but her head moves around in a desultory manner indicating that she literally cannot locate herself within this area. There is a sudden cut to Charlotte standing nervously on a train platform; a train speeds past her and its windows fracture her silhouette into separate images that are ill-defined and blurred. There is another rapid cut to Charlotte standing beside a male passenger in a metro car; the hand-held camera slowly pans from her face, which is expressing shock, to a close-up of the pornographic Manga comic that



the man is reading. Another cut reveals Charlotte being pushed to and fro as she tries to exit the metro car; she appears as a peripheral figure on the side of the frame, and the bodies of the other passengers, who are closer to the camera, are not kept in focus and thus are seen as black and light blue patches of hazy colour that efface Charlotte as she walks past. A cut to Charlotte riding upwards on the escalator follows; she remains stationary while the other characters walk towards the exit. On the left-hand side of the frame, the movement of the escalator going downwards merges with the busy movement of commuters who are heading into the metro system. The escalator may be taking Charlotte upwards, but she is looking downwards, back into the metro system, as though she is afraid to leave it. A final cut shows Charlotte at the top of the escalator, slightly off-centre in the frame; she is seen as one body amongst many here, but she stands out because of her lack of movement in contrast to the commotion around her. The people who surround her move with purpose and speed, but she walks tentatively and stares around her. In all of these shots, Charlotte is not held in the centre of the frame and often appears on its edges, as though she is about to disappear out of sight. Furthermore, rack focus is never used in this sequence, so Charlotte's environment remains a blurred landscape within which the viewer finds it hard to locate him/herself as well. The rapid cutting fragments the sequence and makes it impossible for the viewer to conjoin one space to another, and the different speeds of bodies and technology (trains and escalators) disorientate both Charlotte and the viewer. Additionally, she is notably passive in this sequence: she is moved and pushed to and fro by other people and technological apparatus, but remains still herself.



**Figure 31: Charlotte in the Tokyo underground system.**

After this excursion into Tokyo, Charlotte seems compelled to stay in the safety of her hotel bedroom where she can look down on the city from a distanced and safe vantage point that allows her to keep everything in focus. The smoothness of the tracking shots that trace her



movements around the hotel also suggest that, in contrast to the hand-held shots in the fast-paced street scenes, this is a calm environment in which she can find her bearings. Chen Hsiang-Chiu (2008) also notes this discrepancy between the scenes in the hotel and the sequences shot in the bustling streets of Tokyo; he writes: '[through] both representations of the contact zone—especially Tokyo's hustle-and-bustle streets—and the hotel, there exists an imposing contrast between the two: the former appears as a fragmented, discontinuous space, overflowing with dazzling postmodern signs; the latter is however filmed to be a coherent, familiarized environment, as if it were America's "enclave" in Eastern Asia.' Coppola shows the hotel as a safe site of refuge from a foreign environment. Notably, Charlotte makes an effort to turn her hotel room into a kind of home by domesticating the space as she covers it with her belongings. She places photographs around the room, hangs a cherry blossom lampshade from the ceiling and strews her clothes over the furniture.

Charlotte's initial encounter with the guests of the hotel is portrayed in a manner that is reminiscent of Deleuze's description of the 'multiplication of clichés' (Deleuze 2005: 3) in modern cinema. As we have seen, Deleuze views this as being a symptom of the breakdown of the action-image cinema, but it is also part of the way the modern protagonist sees his/her world. In particular, Charlotte seems to be repelled by Kelly, a petite, blonde actress who specialises in action-movies and who has worked with John. When Charlotte first meets her, Kelly's presence divides John and Charlotte visually in the film frame, so that they face each other as though in confrontation, while John's inane conversation with Kelly clearly irritates Charlotte. At one point during their meeting, the camera crosses over the line of action so that Charlotte replaces Kelly's position in the frame; ordinarily, such a device might suggest an association between two characters, but here it only foregrounds the contrast between Charlotte and Kelly. Charlotte refuses to take part in the rituals of polite conversation here, whereas John is able to adapt to Kelly's company. Charlotte becomes an observer who looks in on a situation that she seems to find comical. This is not merely because what Kelly says has little substance to it; it is also because of what she represents to Charlotte. Kelly's presence on screen functions as a hackneyed cinematic image: she is a petite, blonde and effervescent figure whose style and gestures reflect a multitude of American actresses who work within popular cinema, such as the 'romantic comedy' genre. Kelly, as an image or a product, has no depth. However, it is clear from other sequences in the film that Charlotte fears that she has no inner substance either. Kelly perhaps represents what Charlotte most fears in herself. Charlotte's unhappiness seems to stem from a culture of consumerism to which she has subscribed to unwittingly; she believes

that she has *to be* someone, otherwise she is ‘nothing’ at all. The scene that follows the encounter with Kelly is illuminating in this respect.



**Figure 32:** Charlotte observes John and Kelly.

Alone in her hotel room, Charlotte listens to a ‘self-help’ tape called ‘A Soul’s Search’. The ‘guru’ on the tape suggests that every soul has a purpose that has been pre-selected before arrival on our planet. An ‘inner map theory’ helps the listener to find his/her ‘purpose’ in life. The fact that Charlotte even listens to this suggests that she is in search of a role model. After listening to this tape, she is seen aimlessly wandering through the hotel corridors where she stumbles upon a press conference that Kelly is giving about her film *Midnight Velocity* in one room and a traditional Japanese flower arranging (ikebana) class in another room. In both of these sequences, Charlotte is shot from behind as she peers in on the action from just inside of a doorway; she seems reluctant to cross the thresholds into these rooms. In these scenes, Charlotte is hesitant to associate herself with the feminine archetypes that she encounters in these rooms; yet the fact that she wanders around suggests that she is desperately searching for something with which to identify herself. She wants neither to associate herself with Kelly who uses her femininity as a commodity, nor with the Japanese women dressed in formal kimonos who are enacting an established female custom that promotes values of domesticity and home-making. Kelly’s oversexed beauty is but the counterpart to the stereotype of the ‘perfect housewife’ of 1950s America (represented here through a Japanese model), since both define and control



women within a patriarchal system. Charlotte hovers in a liminal space between these two stereotypes and is unable to identify herself with anything at all.



Figure 33: Charlotte wanders around the hotel.

After telephoning a friend in America in a state of extreme distress, which her friend fails to notice, a short sequence shows Charlotte applying lipstick and putting her hair up. Visually, these shots become what Deleuze (2005: 67) would term ‘hyalosigns’ or crystal images in which an interchange of the virtual and the actual takes place so that they become indiscernible because: ‘the actual optical image crystallizes with *its own* virtual image’. Charlotte seems to be looking at and questioning herself in a mirror; yet she is framed by the camera in such a way that it is impossible to tell whether what we see is the ‘real’/‘actual’ Charlotte or the ‘mirror’ image of Charlotte. This complication of the image allows the viewer to experience the confusion that the protagonist herself feels over her identity. It is significant that she is grooming herself as these are rituals that a woman uses in order to assume an identity. By putting on a painted face, a woman partially identifies with the ‘feminine’ and accepts being an object of beauty. Yet, the crystalline nature of the image confounds the issue of identity as it reveals the splitting of the subject in time: ‘(t)he continual splitting of time that doubles perception with memory also constitutes a fundamental division of the subject.’ (Rodowick 2003: 129) Charlotte cannot pin her identity down as it is constantly open to the force of time that is change and mutation. The



stable sense of self that she craves is actually non-existent because the self is mutable and evolving; thus, any sense of self she attains can be only fleeting and momentary. Indeed, the opening shot of the film already suggests that Charlotte is a character who is yet to be formed: a medium close-up of Charlotte's body suggests the unformed nature of her identity as she appears to be very fleshy and her two legs merge as though into one limb. She is wearing a pale blue jumper and light pink knickers that are in keeping with the overall pastel colour scheme of the scene, and the curves and peaks of her body are reminiscent of a landscape. She does not stand out from her environment but blends in with it here. Furthermore, this shot is incomplete; the viewer sees only half of her body, while her face, which typically affirms identity, is not shown in the frame.

It is significant that Bob Harris used to be an actor associated with 'action movies'. He is visibly weary and middle-aged; he injures his foot from exercising on an erratic cross-trainer in the hotel gym, and his body is a source of visual comedy in the film rather than being the lithe, supple body of a man who 'does his own stunts'. Clearly, Bob is no longer a man of 'action'; as if to emphasise this, the film includes numerous scenes of him sitting and staring into space that are reminiscent of Deleuze's words that, in the modern cinema of time, the 'agent' has been replaced by the 'seer' (2005: 2). The first time the viewer is introduced to Bob, he has just woken up in a taxi and is rubbing his eyes and staring out at the neon-lit landscape of Tokyo as though in disbelief. It is also important that Tokyo becomes a site in which Bob, like Charlotte, is unable to locate himself; action is replaced by contemplation through his status as a tourist. Bob is seen staring at his own image either in the mirror or on television – indeed, within the first two minutes of the film he has been visually compared to an image of himself in an advertisement for Suntory whiskey. In contrast to Charlotte who cannot 'find herself' anywhere, Bob is assaulted by images that affirm his identity as a particular 'entity'. If an awareness of an abundance of clichés typifies, for Deleuze, a kind of crisis, Bob can be seen as an exemplary case of a man in crisis, because his identity is defined through stereotypical images that are used as marketable commodities. Deleuze (2005: 176) reminds us that in the modern cinema: 'stereotypes, clichés, ready-made visions and formulas took away the outside world and the interiority of characters in the same decomposition.' Bob has as difficult a time relating to the outside world and his fellow human beings (such as his family) as he does to himself. He is surrounded by images of himself, none of which he seems to match up to; in one scene he is watching television and finds a re-run of a *Saturday Night Live* show in which he took part, but it has been dubbed into Japanese. Bob's

alienation from his own identity is not only furthered by the fact that his likeness is speaking in a language that he cannot understand, but also by a tripartite comparison within this scene of Bob with his own image and a monkey. The shot is set up so that the audience initially sees Bob watching the television; there is then a cut to what he is watching and, as he scrolls through the television channels, he discovers a younger image of himself from this aforementioned comedy sketch; then, within the scene on the television screen, the camera pans from a younger Bob to a monkey that is making a similar expression to him. This is followed by a cut back to Bob watching the television, his face full of tiredness rather than amusement. Clearly, this scene implies that Bob feels like ‘a performing monkey’ who is dressed up for other people’s amusement. Additionally, Chen-Hsiang Chiu (2006) notes that Bob may be ‘exoticised’ in the manner that ethnic minorities traditionally have been through Western depictions of their culture. Here, it is Bob that is the spectacle and is reduced to stereotypical proportions and consumed as a commodity; he writes: ‘it is possible that he becomes an “other” in the native’s eyes, and stands out like a cartoonish spectacle for visual consumption, as we can see his puppet-like posture in his attendance at a Japanese talk show, *Matthew’s Best Hit TV*.’ Indeed, Bob knows that his visit to Japan is a purely commercial one and he is required to sell himself by fulfilling certain expectations, even if this means that he must conform to his represented or commodified self.



**Figure 34:** Bob watches his former self.

This discrepancy between Bob and his own image is most apparent in the scene in which he is photographed for Suntory whiskey publicity material. The scene opens on him with his back to



the camera, surrounded by assistants who are preparing him for the photo shoot. The camera slowly draws closer to him as the assistants depart from the frame; it pans around from the left and reveals the photographic studio before tightly framing him in front of a grey backdrop. As he swivels around on his chair, he is caught in profile so that the hairclips sticking out of the back of his jacket, which ensure that his suit appears to fit properly, are visible and then he faces fully the camera. The frenetic activity that encircled him just moments before has ceased and he becomes a mobile 'photographic image' in a way that is similar to Deleuze's description of the crystal image as 'an image in a mirror, a photo or a postcard' coming to 'life' (2005: 67). Of course, in this sequence, it is perfectly possible to discern between the 'actual' and 'virtual' Bob. However, the 'virtual' images of Bob are numerous so it is impossible for the viewer to tell who he is outside of these portraits. He is so wholly tied up with his status as a commodity that he seems to be nothing more than these virtual variations of his 'self'. As we saw earlier, Deleuze states that, in the modern cinema, virtual images can: 'absorb the entire actuality of the character.' (2005: 68) The 'real' Bob is indiscernible from his 'image'. For Deleuze, the flourishing of virtual images, which erases the distinction between an original and a copy, is not pernicious: his philosophy seeks to abolish the Platonic hierarchy of transcendent forms, copies and simulacra. Deleuze's philosophy of immanence posits these notions on the same level in order to eliminate origins in favour of continual production. Viewed from a Deleuzian perspective then, it is not the profusion of images of Bob that is harmful then, but the fact that he has become too readily identified with one type of image (that of the 'movie star') that is detrimental. This association positions and fixes his identity in a consumerist market. Murphy (2006: 39) writes of Bob: '(b)eing seen by all, Murray's character is ironically lost to himself...caught in the game of monetary and visual exchange.' Interestingly, the photographer asks him to assume the superficial characteristics of artists that are older and more iconic than Bob, such as Frank Sinatra. Bob adopts the expressions of these performers in an immediately identifiable fashion, because their characteristics were packaged and marketed in the same way that his personality has been. Cliché acts on two levels here: firstly, there are the stereotypical attributes that Bob has to adopt, which are easily understandable in most cultures, and thus function as a form of cultural short-hand; secondly, there is the fact that Bob is being photographed, which, if the reading offered here is taken to be valid, reminds one once more that a 'cliché' can also mean 'negative' or 'print' in French. His image here is at once stultified, deadened and simplified through a process that can readily reproduce multiple versions of 'Bob'. The photographer's request that Bob imitate Roger Moore is revealing in light of the fact that he is remembered for being the fourth James Bond and constantly contrasted with 'the original',



Sean Connery. This is an identification that Bob himself questions: ‘seriously, Roger Moore? Didn’t you get the Sean Connery one over here?’ he asks. Although his take on Roger Moore is rather amusing in its accuracy, it is also poignant; Bob is already a ‘has been’ and in this scene he is not even granted the privilege of imitating the ‘real’ James Bond. Bob becomes a poor copy of a poor copy – a completely hollow cliché. Bob’s image is caught up with a whole host of stereotypes at this moment that all have their place in a commercial world of exchange; Bob does not own his image, it belongs to other people. Furthermore, the constructed and artificial nature of this cliché is very evident in the flattened out, two-dimensional image of Bob in front of the grey screen. Moreover, the hair pins that clip the back of his jacket together, his hair that has been coloured brown to hide its grey streaks, and the obvious application of eyeliner, mascara and foundation to his face all foreground the fact that this persona has been synthetically created. As the photo shoot ends, the photographer starts to take snapshots more quickly and inadvertently captures Bob’s awkward expressions. Eventually, Bob stops trying to imitate other celebrities and merely sits staring into the camera wearing the blank and tired expression that characterise the moments he spends on his own in the film. Here, the cliché starts to break down as Bob’s ‘tiredness and waiting’ (Deleuze 2005: 182) break through into the image. Bob is seeking what Deleuze would call a *line of flight* out of this world of clichés.



Figure 35: Bob Harris as Roger Moore.

Japanese culture is steeped in ancient ritual; although Tokyo has, in some respects, absorbed elements of Western culture and its rites, it still maintains its sense of history and individuality through tradition. Charlotte and Bob experience these rituals differently. Charlotte is in search of some meaningful connection with the world and those around her; her experience of Japanese ritual exacerbates the lack of connection she has with others and the emotional void she confesses to feeling. Bob, on the other hand, experiences the commercial side of Japanese culture; for him there is no boundary between America and Japan; he exists as a commodity in both cultures because he sells himself to people who trade on his image in both countries. His response to the rituals that accompany his arrival in Japan suggests his refusal to see his situation as anything other than a financially beneficial one for both parties.

When Bob first arrives at the hotel, he is greeted by officials from Suntory Whiskey and members of staff from the hotel. There are five representatives from the whiskey company and they stand in a semi-circle; a woman greets him by saying 'welcome to Tokyo'. She goes on to introduce the other representatives who all offer Bob gifts and business cards. This sequence is rendered through a series of close-ups of hands exchanging gifts, smiling faces and people bowing. Bob says 'thank you' to each one, but clearly feels uncomfortable being, quite literally, the centre of attention. He resorts to trying to entertain them by making facetious comments, but in an ironic tone; this sequence is then lent a sense of bathos as a female member of hotel staff hands Bob a fax message from his wife, Lydia, which states that Bob has forgotten their son's birthday, but she's sure 'he'll understand'- a clearly sarcastic comment. Ironically, while participating in a foreign ritual he is reminded that he has forgotten to commemorate an important personal occasion. If he is made to feel uneasy by this initial Japanese ceremony, his wife's acrimonious reminder of his failings as a parent only heighten his sense of remoteness. Interestingly, although this ceremony could be read as a ritual of incorporation as it is ostensibly performed to welcome Bob to Japan, it actually exacerbates the distance between Bob and the Suntory officials. This ceremony, although important in many contexts, is really about the relationship of exchange and commerce that exists between Bob and Suntory. Bob is ashamed that he is in Japan for the sole reason of earning extra money- something that he can, in part, conceal because few Americans will see the Suntory whiskey advertisement that he will star in. Moreover, the Suntory Company is using Bob as a commodity, as a film star who will endorse



their product and associate it with success and sophistication. The baser aspects of this exchange are what Coppola chooses to emphasise in this ceremony through the focus on anonymous hands exchanging goods and the act of shaking hands. Here, the ceremony is revealed as being less about the perennial rituals of welcoming a stranger and integration into a community and more about commerciality and capitalism. Bob's teasing tone signals not only that he is aware of a language barrier between himself and these Japanese businessmen/women, but also that he feels that the nature of this ceremony is somewhat spurious; what he is doing, he openly admits, is not dignified – he is selling himself as a product in exchange for money. Later, he tells Charlotte: 'I am being paid two million dollars to endorse a whiskey when I could be doing a play somewhere; but the good news is that the whiskey works.' By taking part in this advertisement, Bob has not only just promoted his own image as a cliché (this is exactly what Suntory have purchased and what he is feeling weary with), but he has also compromised his artistic integrity.<sup>43</sup> While, as we will see, Charlotte's sense of alienation is felt through her inability to connect with the meaningful aspects of Japanese ritual, Bob's feelings of isolation are brought about by his recognition that nothing is really different in Japan – he is still a commodity who is tied into a commercial contract from which he cannot escape. The fact that this issue is partially concealed by ritual and formality in Japan seems to make this worse for him. Tellingly, the initial sequence in the film starts with a black screen and the recognisable sounds of an airport; a female voice says 'welcome to Tokyo international airport', but this location is never actually seen. There is then a cut to Bob coming out of sleep in a taxi and staring out disbelievingly at Tokyo's neon landscape and rubbing his eyes when confronted with his own image in a Suntory advertisement. This scene implies that there is no boundary between America and Japan because the airport, which is an inherently liminal place where one is separated from one country, but not welcomed into another yet, is never shown. Thus, the ennui that Bob feels in America and his disillusionment with the commercial aspects of the industry within which he works are just as present in Japan or, more specifically Tokyo.

Charlotte's separation from those around her and, more importantly, her sense of self is also revealed through an encounter with Japanese ritual. After Charlotte's disturbing experience on the Tokyo metro system, she goes to Jogan-ji temple in the busy Shinjuku district and sees monks chanting and performing a ceremony. It is noteworthy that she chooses this temple because it is a well-known site of worship for those seeking peace away from the noise of this

---

<sup>43</sup> It seems somewhat apt that Suntory choose to thank Bob for his work with them by sending a prostitute to his hotel room as a gift because he, in a sense, has prostituted himself by working for them.



modernised district. The scene opens with Charlotte walking through a landscape that seems ritually significant. Most of the film frame is filled with stone pillars engraved with Japanese characters, bonsai trees and smaller Bell temples; Charlotte appears as a diminutive figure on the left-hand side of the frame, close to its edge. She is then seen walking across a courtyard where, in mid-shot, her stature is dwarfed further by the temple and a pavilion. A cut to inside the temple shows Charlotte approaching its doorway slowly and carefully; a point of view shot suggests that she is peering tentatively around the corner of the temple's doorway so as to observe the ceremony. Four reverential Japanese observers are sitting on a wooden bench watching the ceremony that is being performed by two monks. Charlotte seems to halt on the threshold of the doorway, as though she is reluctant to step further into the temple. A close-up draws attention to one monk who is striking a large ceremonial incense bowl that lets out a resonating sound in between the chant; Charlotte is seen sidestepping into the temple, but she remains resolutely in the background, pressed up against a pillar. Throughout the sequence, the crescendo of a beating heart is heard, presumably Charlotte's, but her face remains blank or, perhaps, anxious; the sound of the heartbeat blends with the beating of the incense bowl and the chanting, which suggests a sense of anxious immersion. After this, Charlotte calls her friend, Lauren, back in America to tell her about her experience. She starts to cry, something that Lauren does not register, and confesses that she did not feel anything while she was attending what she mistakenly calls a 'shrine'; her tears seem a result of her desperation to feel something. Of course, this need for spiritual communion is often the reason that people make pilgrimages to shrines and temples as places where they can partake in religious immersion within the confines of a community that recognises the cultural significance of such a place and philosophy. Charlotte's spiritual encounter has left her feeling isolated and blank. The segregation she feels is made all the more poignant because she is crying alone in her hotel room on the telephone to a friend who actually asks her to halt the conversation so that she can attend to something else.

Charlotte's longing to feel a connection with something is a visual motif in the film. In a number of scenes she is seen sitting in her hotel window, and her point of view is conveyed through panoramic shots that seem to graze the cityscape beneath her. These shots from her point of view suggest a tension between her need for distance from the city and its disorientating *affects* and a longing to become a part of it. Of course, the image of a woman at a window is one synonymous with melodrama as it juxtaposes confinement with freedom and yearning. Coppola plays on the history of this image effectively to hint at both Charlotte's isolation from, as well as her desire for greater engagement with the world. Charlotte later visits the Heian Shrine and

Nanzenji Temple in Japan's old Capital city, Kyoto. Here, she witnesses a marriage ceremony that appears to remind her of her own marital problems. As one of Japan's most important Zen Buddhist temples, Nanzenji has become a site of pilgrimage for both Japanese people and tourists. Furthermore, Kyoto, as one of the oldest cities in Japan and its former capital, is steeped in tradition and ancient ritual and it is quite common to see women wearing traditional Kimonos as well as Geisha here. What Charlotte witnesses here is a traditional and ancient ceremony performed in the most appropriate setting. However, her reaction to it is ambiguous. As she sees the wedding party processing towards her, she smiles, but this quickly gives way to a look of concern and she hides herself behind some trees from where she observes the wedding party unnoticed. Several close-ups from Charlotte's point of view show that the bride is heavily made-up in white make up and is dressed in a traditional kimono with a hood. Although it is difficult to read Charlotte's reaction, shock and concern seem to be the two emotions most clearly imprinted on her face; indeed, this ceremony seems more sinister than beautiful: the bride looks like a painted doll and the highly traditional form of the ceremony harks back to a time when marriages functioned much like business agreements and partnerships were 'arranged'.

#### *Liminality, Deterritorialisation, Connections and Becomings.*

The boundaries between self, other and world begin to dissolve for Bob and Charlotte through their experience of liminality. By being in between two cultures and two time zones, as well as being unable to understand the language and find their way around, Charlotte and Bob experience the Tokyo landscape without some of the restrictions imposed by social norms and cultural codes. More importantly, however, they undergo this experience *through* their bodies, as they are forced to rely on instinct rather than judgement and knowledge. Deleuze notes that the alienation the modern protagonist feels from the world can only be overcome by a stubborn decision to believe in *this* world through the body (2005: 167). In a manner that seems to echo this idea, Coppola alters the formal properties of her film in its latter part; the smooth and distanced camera work that typifies the outlook of the protagonists in the first half is replaced by rapid cuts, superimpositions, washes of colour and sound, blurred images and random changes of direction. Deleuze (2005: 164) writes that the predicament of the alienated modern protagonist is: '(t)o believe, not in a different world, but in a link between man and the world, in love or life, to believe in this as in the impossible, the unthinkable, which none the less cannot but be thought.' For Charlotte and Bob, it is the possibility of connecting with another human being and their encounter with the city that potentially helps to restore their belief in this world.

Tokyo becomes a zone of and for *detrterritorialisation* in the film; for Deleuze and Guatarri (Parr: 2005, 67), this process can be ‘physical, mental or spiritual’. In *Lost In Translation* this procedure has three layers: the physical detrterritorialisation of the main protagonists from America to Japan; the detrterritorialisation of Japanese signifiers, geographical coordinates and codes; and the spiritual detrterritorialisation of the two central protagonists. Deterritorialisation can be viewed primarily as a diversion away from rigid norms, structures and ideals. Adrian Parr (2005: 67) notes of this concept: ‘(p)erhaps detrterritorialisation can best be understood as a movement producing change. In so far as it operates as a line of flight, detrterritorialisation indicates the creative potential of an assemblage. So, to detrterritorialise is to free up the fixed relations that contain a body, all the while exposing it to new organisations.’ As we have seen, by being physically removed from their habitual environment, the main protagonists’ routines are abandoned; furthermore, they cannot find their way around this new environment; coordinates and maps begin to lose sense, and their jet-lag throws their sense of chronological time into disarray. Due to the fact that they cannot understand the language, the neon Japanese characters that appear all over the city become detached from any meaning – signifier and signified no longer conjoin here. Finally, their improvised journey through Tokyo excites both the protagonists and, perhaps, the viewer through a free play of lights, textures and speeds that all tend towards a haptic rather than an optical quality. During the scene in which Bob and Charlotte spend the night in Tokyo some of the formal qualities of the image, as well as the viewpoint of the camera, are not strictly identifiable with specific things or people; this is a quality of detrterritorialisation which, as Claire Colebrook (2002: 58) states: ‘produces an image of “pure affect” [so that] there is a sensation that is not referred to any specific body or place.’ It is in these later scenes in the film that the special status of the camera’s viewpoint and, by extension, that of the protagonists becomes most apparent. This outlook is neither strictly objective nor subjective; the hesitant viewpoint that is often associated with Charlotte is also that of the filmmaker who is equally foreign in this environment. This dual status of the image recalls Pasolini’s description of *free indirect subjectivity*;<sup>44</sup> free indirect subjectivity blurs the distinction between subjective and objective viewpoints. The protagonist’s outlook and that of the director merge in this process so as both to complement and complicate each other. John Orr (1998: 2-3) states of this style of filmmaking: ‘(t)he shot seems to express the point of view of the disturbed subject yet does not operate primarily through the point of view shot...[so that] we have

---

<sup>44</sup> Although Pasolini’s theory mostly refers to the viewpoints of neurotic or ill characters, it helps to detail how an altered state of consciousness can be manifested visually. Pasolini writes with reference, in particular, to the films of Antonioni such as *Il Deserto Rosso* (1964).



simultaneously, subjective vision and a clinical distancing from it.' There is only one shot in the film that can specifically be tied to Charlotte's viewpoint (a brief shot at the shrine in the temple scene), and Bob is almost always seen through a detached viewpoint. Importantly though, these viewpoints mirror the ways in which the protagonists interact with their environment and their relationship to themselves at this stage of the film. However, although this style matches the protagonists' feelings of being lost and alienated, it later comes to signal their immersion in the cityscape and its transformative powers of becoming. In these later scenes, in which Charlotte in particular seems to be no longer afraid or perturbed by the city, the viewpoint is not strictly that of the protagonists or the filmmaker; rather it seems to be that of the city itself as well as that of the main characters and filmmaker. Here, the point of view shot has been deterritorialised in favour of a free indirect vision, which, according to Deleuze, is also a new way of thinking and mode of being that re-connects us to the world. In the second half of the film, images are enchainé not to relate narrative detail or to clarify a situation, but rather to maximise *affects*. Images of pure light, variations of colour, random changes of direction, superimpositions, dissolves and close-ups of blurred or indefinite textures help to illustrate the protagonists' joint encounter with the city in the latter part of the film. Additionally, these images are shown through varying speeds in a manner that can impact directly on the body of the viewer and that mirrors the protagonists' own experience in their environment.

As discussed earlier, although it is not a specific rite of passage, the experience of being a tourist closely resembles the tripartite structure of separation, liminality and re-incorporation. In *Lost In Translation*, the tourist experience becomes a quasi rite of passage because Bob and Charlotte both become liminal entities through their experience as tourists. By being removed from a familiar environment and experiencing jet-lag, their bodies and habits are thrown into disarray, while their ambiguous status as liminal entities makes them more open to forming connections and improvising than they would have been otherwise. Most importantly, the experience of liminality opens up their ideal of 'being' to 'becoming', mutation, transition and change. It is interesting that Tokyo itself acts as a visual metaphor for the dichotomy between home and foreignness. Tokyo's Park Hyatt hotel functions as a neutral environment in which the protagonists can orientate themselves and keep Tokyo's foreign landscape at a distance; it is, in itself, a liminal space between Western and Asian cultures, a fact that Chen-Hsiang Chiu (2008) also notes: 'Park Hyatt is a "liminal space" where an erotic but non-sexual liaison becomes possible for the protagonists'. Yet, this liminal space found within the confines of the hotel, is

also a familiar environment from which Bob and Charlotte have to be separated in order to undergo truly *detritorialisation*. Indeed, it is not until they cross the threshold that demarcates the safety of the hotel from the bustle of Tokyo's streets that Bob and Charlotte begin to open up to their environment. Once they go out into the city, they become entities akin to Deleuze's *nomad*. Deleuze's and Guattari's concept of the nomad is linked to their account of 'nomos' in *Difference and Repetition* (1994). This concept relates to the undetermined or random distribution of elements; it is contrasted with the concept of 'logos' through which things are distributed in an ordered and pre-determined manner so as to fulfil a particular purpose. Jonathan Roffe (Parr 2005: 185) comments on the idea of nomos: 'it is a matter of considering the nature of Being itself in terms of non-ordered distribution rather than the fixed coordinates of a logically and hierarchically structured universe, such as we find in Plato and Aristotle.' The nomad then, is one who is able to improvise because he/she is not contained by any pre-given laws or structures and thus, is able to make unforeseen connections. Roffe (Parr 2005: 185) notes that the nomadic way of life often takes place in an un-structured environment that does not lend itself to social hierarchies. He notes that the nomadic environment can be contrasted to the city where social life is organised and strictly bounded. Of course, the protagonists' nomadic encounter takes place in a city; however, as we have seen, it is not one with which they are familiar and they are excluded from the rituals and norms of this environment. Unexpectedly, Tokyo acts as a liminal playground for Bob and Charlotte and helps to facilitate their mutation and growth within it. In fact, the manner in which the city space is presented suggests this nomadic relationship too. In contrast to the smooth travelling shots that characterise the scenes set in the hotel, Tokyo is shown as a random and fragmented space in which movement is unpredictable, improvised and free-flowing. On a night out in Tokyo, Charlotte and Bob move through spaces that seem unconnected or disjointed from one another; it is impossible for the viewer to piece together the area they have traversed. Each scene becomes an energetic encounter with light and movement and there is no way of predicting what will happen next. The unforeseeable and random connections made during this journey through the city act as catalysts for the protagonists' mutual change and renewal.

The fact that Bob and Charlotte cannot understand the Japanese language compounds their experience of liminality. In his book on Japan and its culture *The Empire of Signs* (1982), Roland Barthes (1982: 9) suggests implicitly that the language barrier can bring about a liminal experience. He argues that in order to be integrated fully into a culture, it is necessary to speak the language; by being outside of this, one is also partially excluded from a culture's norms and

ideology. Therefore, one is able to experience a culture in a more immediate way, free from hierarchical ideals and social judgement. He writes: '(t)he murmuring mass of an unknown language constitutes a delicious protection, envelops the foreigner...in an auditory film which halts at his ears all the alienations of the mother tongue: the regional and social origins of whoever is speaking, his degree of culture, of intelligence, of taste, the image by which he constitutes himself as a person and which he asks you to recognise. Hence, in foreign countries, what a respite! Here I am protected against stupidity, vulgarity, vanity, worldliness, nationality, normality.' Barthes seems to suggest that, by being free from the cultural associations and social categorisations afforded by language, a situation of *communitas* may be more likely to develop because one is inclined to view people with a greater sense of equality. By extension, because the tourist has no defined social status, except that of a foreigner, his/her own normative social hierarchy tends to be abandoned. Barriers such as age and class may become less pronounced in a foreign environment. Speaking a language is a way for a person to be part of a cultural community, to understand and take part in its rituals, and to integrate into a group. As already noted, by being unable to read Japanese script, signifier and signified become detached from one another in *Lost in Translation*. However, as the protagonists' vibrant encounter with the streets of Tokyo proves, the film actually throws into relief the limitations of language when it comes to conveying the visceral experience of becoming with the world.

Notably, Bob and Charlotte are able to make more fluid and open connections than they could previously, not just because of their shared status as tourists, but also because of jet-lag. It becomes part of the protagonists' liminal experience as they hover between sleep and waking and are forced to relinquish their routines in favour of unorganised and unplanned encounters. Felicity Colman (Stivale 2005: 153) notes the importance of the impact jet lag has on the central characters' interaction with their environment and those surrounding them: '(i)nsomnia distends each moment, enabling each character in their surrounding territory to further stray from the kind of relationship their deterministic chronological selves might have produced.' The fortuitous connections that Charlotte and Bob make are not those that would have been made had they kept to their rigidly imposed routines and habits; they meet during an hour when both of them are expected to be asleep and their outlooks on the city, in particular that of Charlotte, are always characterised by a soporific quality, as speed gives way to a more languid pace and sharply-defined features tend towards indistinctness as colours seep into one another. Insomnia disrupts routines, but it also forces the protagonists to look at the world in a different way; their outlook onto the world is no longer governed by the need for action and achieving certain goals,



but rather by contemplation and a questioning of their environment and the habitual connections made in everyday life. Matching this state of being in between sleeping and waking are the activities with which Charlotte and Bob occupy themselves: the scenes which show the protagonists by themselves are notable for being moments of void or dead time in which nothing happens. Coppola chooses to show the audience the main characters engaged in activities that would usually be left out of most films, such as staring into space, looking out of windows, bathing or listening to music.

Bob and Charlotte's encounter with the city draws them in closer to a state of *becoming* rather than *being*; as we shall see, this is matched in the film's formal appeal in its latter sections. When Charlotte and Bob meet her friends in a Tokyo bar, the scene plays out in stark contrast to the style of the earlier sequences set in the hotel bar. Whereas these moments in the hotel are typified by stasis or long takes that unify space, the scenes in Tokyo's bars are characterised by movement, sharp cutting, changes of direction, bright neon colours and loud music. Space is fragmented and the spectator is required to focus on the *affects* contained within the scene rather than its narrative significance. Charlotte and Bob start their evening in a bar/nightclub; here, they are but two figures in a scene filled with movement; the light show at the back of the bar obscures and tends to dissolve individual features and turns the protagonists into dark shadows against a luminous backdrop. Visually, they are part of a shifting, light-filled world, while the camera focuses on the movement of bodies and bodily contact, such as hands touching, people kissing and bodies bumping into each other. As if in a process of *becoming*, bodies literally collide and visually merge here. Additionally, Bob converses with a Japanese man in French, a language that neither of them speaks fluently, which suggests that it is easier to explore the unfamiliar in this setting. The whole of this sequence, which extends into the streets of Tokyo, a games arcade, a Japanese home and a karaoke bar is filmed on a hand-held camera that lends it a vitality which throws the static quality of earlier scenes into sharp relief. This theme of extension into and immersion in the cityscape becomes even more apparent as Bob, Charlotte and their Japanese friends are chased through the streets of Tokyo by an irate bartender with an air pellet gun. The fluid speed of the camera work, its hand-held quality and the rapid editing compliments the speed of the protagonists as they run through the streets in different directions. By not using rack focus, Bob and Charlotte become blurred figures in an image of continual and flowing movement where their bodies are not privileged within the frame over those of others or their environment. There is a notable contrast in the level of sound as Bob and Charlotte dive into a games arcade in order to escape the confrontation; the cacophony of electronic noise heightens

the frenetic effect of these sequences; the camera has to 'hunt' for them amongst the various game arcades, as though in a game of hide and seek.



**Figure 36: Bob in one of Tokyo's nightclubs.**

The ensuing scene that takes place at a Japanese surfer's house compliments this new and playful tone. Here, all the characters dance together as though in a form of communion and their bodies intertwine in mild flirtation; again, the camera focuses on the physicality of the human body, while the rituals of aggregation also become more prominent in this scene. The camera is no longer detached from the protagonists as though observing them; indeed, the camera shares in the intimacy of this scene as Charlotte and Bob shake hands, sit close to, share marijuana, drink and dance with people whom they do not know. As they dance, their bodies merge not only because they are physically close, but also because the camera does not re-focus, so that they also appear to blur visually into one another. Charlotte poses with a Japanese girl as one of the house guests takes their photo; he tells them to look 'gorgeous' and Charlotte deliberately plays up to this as though she is a model. The idea of assuming a persona and becoming someone else is developed more explicitly in the following scene in a Karaoke bar. As a form of play-acting, karaoke is about engaging with different identities through performance. The manner in which this sequence is presented to the viewer decentres his/her own corporeality and helps him/her to engage in the protagonists' process of deterritorialisation. Sharp blasts of sound, sudden movements and strobe lighting assault the viewer's perspective, while the songs function as a



form of indirect communication between the protagonists. Indeed, the music helps them to express sentiments that they have been unable to convey to each other up until this point.

The sequence opens suddenly with Charlotte's friend, Charlie Brown singing The Sex Pistols' *God Save the Queen*; he sings directly to the camera and thus draws the viewer into the action as though he/she were partaking in the making of a 'homemade' video. There are a number of sharp cuts in this scene (including a cut to an exterior aerial shot of the party in the karaoke booth) as well as changes in the sound levels, the disorientating effects of which are heightened by strobe lighting. The camera sways violently as though mirroring the protagonists' movements and the prevalent theme of anarchy expressed in the song sung. Bob then sings *Peace, Love and Understanding*. He deliberately 'over-sings' his performance and gesticulates wildly in order to convey the desperate essence of the song: 'as I walk through this wicked world searching for light in the darkness of insanity, I ask myself "is all hope lost? Is there only hatred and pain and misery?" and each time I feel like this inside, there's one thing that I want to know: what's so funny about peace, love and understanding?' The camera pans between Bob's bombastic performance and the other protagonists who are all dancing and cheering to the song. Unlike the editing at the beginning of this scene, the panning, hand-held shot has the effect of uniting everyone in the scene as though to affirm an answer to the song's main question. Charlotte then sings The Pretenders' *Brass in Pocket*; she is wearing a pink wig that is cut into a sharp bob, which makes her look like a post-modern variation of screen icon Louise Brooks. Like Brooks, Charlotte acts in a subtly flirtatious and alluring manner here and directly and deliberately courts and draws in Bob's gaze, and by extension that of the camera. Here, the spectator sees a side of Charlotte that has remained hidden in the earlier scenes. Although she has a predilection for neutral colours and classic designs in her unostentatious clothing, her pink wig in this scene makes her stand out; she moves her body in a sensual manner which draws attention to the song's themes of femininity and seduction: 'gonna use my arms, gonna use my legs, gonna use my style, gonna use my sidestep, gonna use my fingers, gonna use my imagination. Cos I'm gonna make you see, there's nobody else, no one like me. I'm special and I've gotta have some of your attention - give it to me.' Bob answers her affirmations by filling in the backing vocals ('special, so special') and smiling at her. The camera does not really move in this song, apart from to observe Bob's reaction, as though it too were admiring Charlotte as a provocative, seductive spectacle. The scene ends with Bob's rendition of Roxy Music's plaintive song *More Than This*, which he seems to sing to Charlotte because he glances over his shoulder at her throughout his performance. The song, which expresses themes of uncertainty and longing, seems to speak of



Bob's emotional isolation, but by looking at Charlotte as he sings he seems to be reaching out to her in his sadness. In contrast to his earlier musical rendition, there is nothing forced or false about Bob's performance here, even though his voice cracks when straining to reach the song's higher notes. Rather than incorporating the whole party into the scene, the camera tends to focus in close-up on the growing intimacy between Charlotte and Bob.

The sequence that follows on from the karaoke is one of overt deterritorialisation for the protagonists and the spectator via visual and aural stimulation. There is a sudden cut from Charlotte and Bob sitting outside the karaoke booth to them inside a taxicab. The first shot is a rapid pan across the brightly-lit Rainbow Bridge; the movement in this shot does not come from the camera's momentum, but rather from the car's speed. However, at this point in the sequence, it is not clear that the scene is shot from inside a car or that it is any particular person's point of view; so the effect is one of an anonymous eye that mirrors the sleepy, inebriated and dream-like gaze of the protagonists. Furthermore, the bridge stands out as though it is hovering above the night sky, an effect that heightens the dream-like impression of the scene. The immediate impact of this moment, when contrasted with the intimacy of the previous scene, is to shock the spectator through its speed and bright lighting. Furthermore, the images in this sequence tend towards dissolution through the deliberate avoidance of rack focus; the neon colours appear as though they are seeping into one another in a liquid landscape. The song accompanying this scene is *Sometimes* by the band My Bloody Valentine whose distinctive sound of distorted electric guitars overlaid with muted acoustic guitars and keyboards that almost drown out the gentle vocal lines pertinently compliments the evocation of the disintegration of self that is one of the film's key themes here. One moment in the scene that visually demonstrates the effect of this combination of speeds, textures, colours and sounds on Charlotte consists of a close-up of her face as she looks out of the taxi window. Here, her face seems to dissolve into the landscape as though she were one element in a convergence of colours and textures; as the reflections of the city and its vibrant lights are cast onto her face, the camera fades out into another image and she eventually seems to disappear entirely. Indeed, in contrast to the rapid cutting that typified some of the scenes set in Tokyo, this scene is conveyed through dissolves and super-impositions that visually suggest immersion and disintegration into the landscape or the breaking down of barriers between self, other and world. The significance of this moment is carried over into the following scene in which Bob carries Charlotte back to her hotel room. In the background of this scene, the My Bloody Valentine song can still be heard faintly but, through a deft use of sound design, it is played as though from a distance, which emphasises the importance of this experience and

the fact that it now exists as a memory that is retained in the body, as a reminder of life's vibrancy.



Figure 37: Charlotte in a taxi.

The protagonists' encounter with Tokyo helps to reveal life's possibilities rather than its limitations. In Deleuzian terms, it could be said that both protagonists begin to relinquish ideas of *being* in favour of a *becoming with life* because of their tourist experience. Amy Murphy (2006: 41) recognises the city's power to undo and re-define the self in *Lost In Translation*: 'through such complex diversity that favors chance over destiny.' In particular, Charlotte's experience of the city acts as both a source of disintegration and an aid to finding 'the self'; however, this 'self' has nothing to do with the ideas espoused in the 'self-help' tape she listens to earlier in the film. Rather, this undoing of the self provides the path to discovering creativity and the fluidity of any notion such as a 'self'. Whereas this seems to frighten Charlotte in the earlier part of the film and forces her to strengthen the definitions of herself by putting up further boundaries, she comes to discover deterritorialisation as a path to renewal and change by the film's conclusion. This is most apparent in the final scene of the film in which she is seen immersed in the throng of the city; she is one person in a crowd here and this moment conveys visually her re-integration into life. Her movements are more determined and assured, her surroundings are kept in focus and the colour scheme seems more naturalistic here, which suggest incorporation rather than separation from the landscape. Bob, in turn, manages to reclaim his commodified image for himself and find a way of controlling it rather than being controlled by it. It is *his* decision to stay in Japan for a further week in order to appear on a Japanese talk show; although this is undoubtedly motivated by his new-found connection with Charlotte (he looks at a Polaroid of



her as he makes the telephone call to sort out the arrangements for extending his stay), it also comes after a brief episode in which the audience recognises that Bob is able to laugh at his image now. In other words, he is able to recognise its difference from his 'self'. During another evening in Tokyo, Bob and Charlotte race across a busy road, dodging in between the cars as Bob performs a running commentary on their actions as though they were in a football game; suddenly, an advertisement for Suntory whiskey on the side of a vehicle comes into the frame. Charlotte points to it and Bob waves in a humorous manner at his own image; he then looks around him to see if anyone has noticed that it is him, but the city is full of occupied and busy people. Here, it seems as though Bob has learnt to see his commodified image as merely one facet of himself; it no longer seems to subsume him.

As we have seen in the discussion of *Dead Man* and *Last Days* in the previous chapter, the path to *becoming* is discovered through the body. In this reading then, Charlotte and Bob reconnect with the world from which they have clearly felt isolated by recasting the body as the source of a visceral bond with the world and as the pathway to new strategies of thinking. Deleuze (2005: 166) states that in order to overcome the modern condition of alienation, the modern cinema must film *belief* in this world; he writes: '(o)nly belief in the world can reconnect man to what he sees and hears. The cinema must film, not the world, but belief in this world, our only link.' Belief is related to choice or, more specifically, the: 'mode of living of one who is capable of choosing.' (Bogue 2003: 180) Bob and Charlotte seem to choose to believe in the world by the end of the film; however, this is a belief made possible by feeling the world *through* the body, a state that is mirrored in the film's formal make-up. In her book on Deleuze, Barbara M. Kennedy (2001: 98) reminds the reader that, for Deleuze, to think is to feel through the body; she writes: 'the body and the mind are "modifications" of the same substance.' However, for Deleuze, this 'body' is a decentred one that is capable of letting sensation traverse it by being open to the experience of *becoming* rather than *being*. In other words, Deleuze's concept of the body privileges the ability to feel and be affected over the ability to *be*. Indeed, sensation displaces or undoes the 'self'. The common conception of the self as a coherent, self-sufficient entity with defined and stable characteristics or personality traits is effaced in favour of an open body that resists structure and binary definitions, but that is more open to feeling as a consequence of this. *Lost In Translation* is a film that centres on two individuals who re-discover the ability to feel through an encounter of immanence in a foreign city, but this 'meeting' is facilitated through liminality. This does not re-affirm consistent or abiding identities; rather, the concept of self that the two central characters confront and question in the film is shown to be a



fallacy. As we have seen, the second part of the film conveys the idea of selfhood through formal elements that evoke themes of mutability, fluidity and constant evolution. Coppola effaces the notion of an enduring and consistent human identity by the film's conclusion.

It is significant that many of the film's moments of becoming take place in different types of transportation. Charlotte and Bob both spend a lot of time travelling somewhere; they are either in trains, metro carriages, cars or (although not seen) aeroplanes, a situation that is befitting of their liminal status and their search for transformation and emotional connection. As liminal entities, they are passengers, but this status also allows them to feel in a way that they had not previously; their journeying through the city and the interconnections they make along the way re-awaken their ability to feel. Yet, if this process is felt through the body, it also effaces personal characteristics, so that *feeling* is given precedence over *thinking*. The film's most significant moments of becoming happen while the two protagonists are *in transit*. As we have seen, the taxi ride scene provides an important example of this. However, the characters' constant journeying also enables *becoming*. As Charlotte and Bob *run* through the city, they begin to merge with both the city and the population; indeed, in these latter busy street scenes, it can be difficult to pick out the main characters within the image. Above all, this movement facilitates the formation of connections. Furthermore, it is crucial that the theme of *becoming* is linked to transportation in the film as the act of travelling or being in motion can suggest interminability; becoming is a process without end and, notably, the film concludes with a travelling shot from inside the taxi cab in which Bob is riding. Echoing the words that Bob whispers into Charlotte's ear, which remain unheard by the viewer, the film's conclusion remains enigmatic. Coppola chooses to leave the viewer with images of the central protagonists in motion; Charlotte is last seen *walking* off into the busy streets of Tokyo and merging with the crowd, while Bob's perspective out of the taxi window as he leaves Tokyo ushers in the film's titles. The existential implication of the film's conclusion is not merely that the protagonists' futures remain unclear or of their own making, but also that their liminal experience as tourists has enabled *becoming* – a process that, by definition, is infinite.

### Broken Flowers (2005)

*Broken Flowers* is about a man named Don Johnston (played by Bill Murray) who receives an anonymous letter from one of his former lovers telling him that, after their relationship ended, she discovered that she was pregnant with Don's child. She states that she decided to keep the child, but had omitted to tell Don about it at the time. Nineteen years later, her son, she suspects, has gone on a road trip to look for his father. Urged on by his neighbour and friend Winston, Don embarks on his own road trip across America to find the mother of his son. Ostensibly, *Broken Flowers* is a road movie; it contains many formal elements that associate it with this genre, such as an inevitable focus on the act of driving and a fetishisation of the car itself, wide panning shots of open landscape and a narrative that serves as an allegory of the quest for meaning or selfhood.<sup>45</sup> However, Jarmusch uses these elements knowingly and ironically. The act of driving is presented as a repetitious activity and there is little differentiation between one day and the next; the vehicle that Don drives is not one of sleek beauty and speed or nostalgia – he describes himself as a 'stalker in a Taurus';<sup>46</sup> the travelling shots of open landscape suggest urban banality and sameness rather than the awe-inspiring and sublime elements that are associated with the road movie; additionally, the use of music lends a comic tone to the absurd and futile quest on which this aging 'Don Juan' has embarked. The road movie has a strong link with the structure of the rite of passage. Indeed, the road movie requires that its protagonist embark on a journey in search of something, either to fulfill a lack or answer a question. The conclusion demands that the central character either return home both wiser and more prepared for what is required of him/her, or the protagonist has been altered by the experience to such an extent that he/she keeps on driving into the distance (and the unknown). Thus, the initial state of crisis is usually partially resolved. Yet if Jarmusch sends his protagonist out on the road, the journey is a fruitless and absurd one that leads to nowhere and, perhaps predictably, Don discovers nothing about his hypothetical son and the anonymous letter-writer.<sup>47</sup> On one level, then, *Broken Flowers* can be read as an absurd quest or road movie; on another level, it is clear that the world of the film is an example of D.N Rodowick's interpretation of Deleuze's '*espace spirituel*' (2005a: 120) as a 'philosophical' space (Rodowick 2009: 106). Within the structure of the road movie, Jarmusch

---

<sup>45</sup> For a good description of the elements of the Road Movie genre, see Laderman (2002).

<sup>46</sup> Most road movies feature vehicles such as open-topped cars and motorcycles that have romantic or nostalgic associations with freedom and rebellion. Two examples of this that come to mind easily are *Easy Rider* (1969) and *Thelma and Louise* (1991).

<sup>47</sup> It would seem likely though that the letter-writer is Sherry, Don's most recent ex-girlfriend. The ending of the film intimates at this.

posits and explores both existential and ethical dilemmas. *Broken Flowers* is read here as a study of 'choice' as a 'mode' of living. Through his experience on the road, Don must become the man who 'chooses to choose' (Deleuze 2005: 171) and to affirm *this* life through chance and becoming. The film is also, in terms of both form and content, a study in apathy, boredom and passive resistance to change and creativity. In order to contextualize and problematise these themes, this reading of the film will draw readily from Deleuze's interpretation of the philosophy of Frederick Nietzsche; in particular his reading of the concepts of *nihilism*, *passivism* and *affirmation* in the *eternal return*.

### *The Diminished Life: Reactive Nihilism and Passivity.*

On the level of narrative, the crisis in *Broken Flowers* centres on the unexpected consequences of one character's actions. Don Johnston's 'past' re-appears inconveniently in the present, which lends the film a certain ethical dimension; indeed one could say that Don has to deal with the repercussions of choices his 'former' self made. More precisely though, the crisis in *Broken Flowers* is one of middle age, the problem of dealing with the effect of time's passing and the urgency placed on life's affirmative possibilities as a result. Due to the weight placed on the very duration of existence in the film, *Broken Flowers* functions as a time-image in itself. Don is compared to younger men throughout the film, often to his disadvantage, while his face is frequently examined in close-ups that reveal the ravaging effects of aging. Jarmusch links time's passing both to the liminality of middle-age and the act of waiting for *something* rather than *nothing* to happen. Furthermore, the opacity or inscrutability of the central character can be allied with Deleuze's delineation of *time as series* (2005: 263) - a fluid image that calls into question the very notion of a stable 'self'. What Jarmusch presents the viewer with is a character who is formed out of tiny gestures and inactivity so as to create what Deleuze (2005: 264), following Brecht, would term the 'gest' of middle-age. On a formal level, Don's crisis is manifest through visual 'symptoms' that strongly remind the viewer of Deleuze's description of the breakdown of the action image. In fact, Don's crisis *is* one of passivity: he seems unable to effect any change in his life and remains resistant and seemingly lifeless. However, to link him to Deleuze's 'seer' (2005: 2) would be erroneous for Don is beyond this: he refuses to see, to feel and to act. It is not that he does not know *how* to act in response to the world around him, but that he makes a concerted effort not to have any response (we see this in his non-responsive conversation with Winston).



In this sense, the only thing he *actively* does is to oppose all forms of change in his life. As a result, his life has become an endless repetition of the same (even his address connotes this, 'Circle Drive, Center City'). As we will see, Jarmusch plays on this theme of repetition of the same through the use of a series of similar shots that imply visually the stultifying nature of Don's existence. The main part of the film, then, maps Don's painfully slow realization that his life is going nowhere, but that he can do something about it. The cinematic world of *Broken Flowers*, as well as Don himself, must be drawn into movement. This is the true journey the film takes the viewer on.

As a take on the road movie genre, the film stages a quasi rite of passage in which the main protagonist is taken out of his habitual environment and away from established routines and is placed within disconcerting situations (that more often than not seem like trials) and new environments.<sup>48</sup> This 'rite of passage' helps to throw into relief questions of an individual's relation to selfhood, volition and his or her future. Yet, as we have seen, the crisis in the film runs much deeper than the necessity of seeking a resolution to, broadly speaking, an 'existential crisis' or a crisis over different 'modes' of life. Don Johnston is a man of such extraordinary passivity that, at the film's beginning, it seems as though he has ceased to exist in any positive or 'active' manner; as an entity on screen, he is a cipher or a mere 'place-holder' for a cinematic 'character' (to borrow Juan A Suarez description, Don has become but one more 'thing' amongst 'things' (2007: 150)). Don is the perfect example of Deleuze's description of the modern protagonist who is: 'objectively emptied...suffering less from the absence of an other than from the absence of himself.' (2005: 9) Don has just been abandoned by his girlfriend Sherry (whom we can surmise is the latest one of many), but he states that he merely 'thinks' he is sorry about this. Not only is he indifferent to the world around him, it would seem he cannot feel anything as well. Through his passivity, Don precludes every affirmative possibility of change and becoming: he spends his time *doing nothing* to such an extreme extent that the only quality Don can be said to affirm is nihilism. Accordingly, Jarmusch's static mise en scène (composed largely

---

<sup>48</sup> Like recent films such as Alexander Payne's *About Schmidt* (2003) and *Sideways* (2006) and Vincent Gallo's *The Brown Bunny* (2006), *Broken Flowers* is a film that places an aging character at the centre of its quest. The use of an older protagonist works against the grain of the quintessential road movie hero who has his/her origins in the youthful and rebellious roles played by James Dean and Marlon Brando.<sup>48</sup> Furthermore, the protagonists of these recent films are not figures who are living on the periphery of society and rebelling against its norms and regulations (Don is a wealthy businessman); rather, they seem to be plagued by some indefinite feeling of ennui or melancholy. These recent 'heroes' are closer to those associated with the angst-ridden characters of the road movies from the 1970s, such as *Bonnie and Clyde* (1969), but they are not outlaws and they are not overtly critical of society.

of still frames and mid-shots) contributes to the creation of a cinematic world of still life: hermetically sealed and unchanging. Jarmusch, quite radically, makes *nothing happen* on screen.

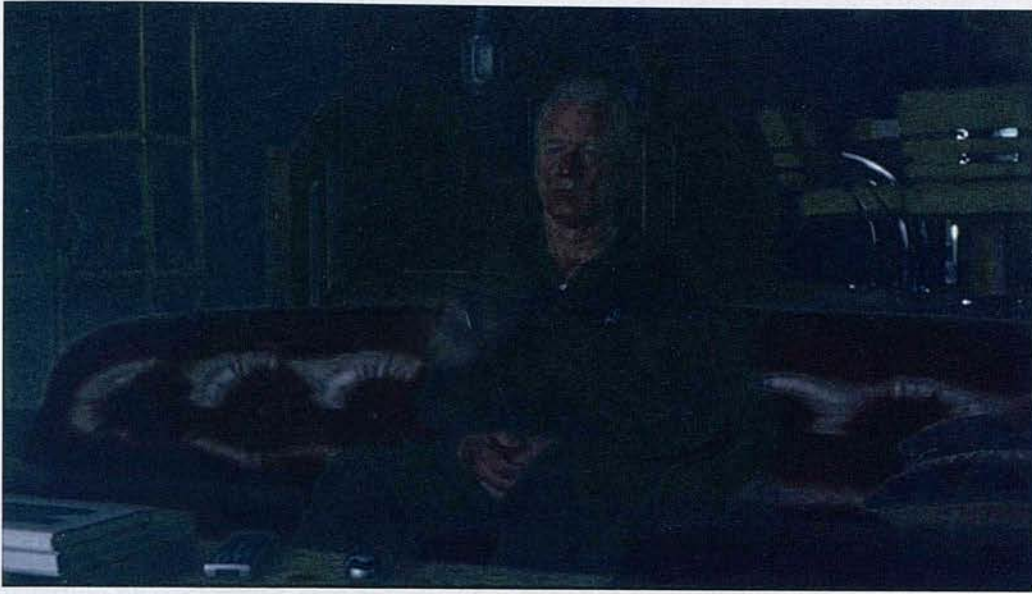


Figure 1: Nothing happens.

In *Nietzsche and Philosophy* (2006), originally written in 1962, Deleuze delineates between two forms of nihilism, of which the final stage is passivism: “passive nihilism” is the final outcome of reactive nihilism: fading away passively rather than being led from outside.’ (2006: 141) He states that: ‘(n)ihil in *‘nihilism’* means negation as quality of the will to power. Thus, in its primary and basic sense, nihilism signifies the value of nil taken on by life, the fiction of higher values which give it this value and the will to nothingness which is expressed in these higher values. Nihilism has a second, more colloquial sense. It no longer signifies a will but a reaction. The supersensible world and higher values are reacted against, their existence is denied, they are refused all validity...only life remains, but it is still a depreciated life which now continues a world without values, stripped of meaning and purpose, sliding ever further towards its nothingness. Previously essence was opposed to appearance... Now essence is denied but appearance is retained: everything is merely appearance, life which is left to us remains for itself an appearance...The first sense is a *negative nihilism*; the second sense a *reactive nihilism*’ (2006: 139-140). It is not the first mode of nihilism that we see embodied in the figure of Don Johnston (he does not deny or debase life on the basis of a set of higher values or a higher world / existence), but the second; Don seems to be someone for whom *nothing has any value or meaning* and thus, he cannot connect to anything. This is to say only ‘nothing’ has a value: the value of nil. Appropriately, Deleuze



states: '(i)n the word nihilism *nihil* does not signify non-being but primarily a value of nil. Life takes on a value of nil insofar as it is denied and depreciated.' (2006: 139) Don occupies a world constructed of surfaces and superficiality. He wears muted colours that compliment the dark beige interior of his house and Jarmusch's low-key lighting serves the purpose of blending character and background together. Furthermore, the few moments in which the viewer sees the world through Don's eyes reveal an ironic distance from and disdain for his fellow beings (a scene on a bus in which Don, from behind dark sunglasses, watches two young girls gossip about inanities is a case in point). As in *Lost in Translation*, the cinematic world here is riddled with archetypal characters that populate a world of pure exteriority. Tellingly though, Don's interior world seems to be as empty as his exterior one: he leads a depreciated form of life (as non-existence), or one of 'diminished expectations' (Suarez 2007: 150).

Don's state of lethargic apathy is similar to Deleuze's description of the modern protagonist who is struck by something 'intolerable' in the banality of 'everyday' existence and is no longer concerned with 'love' and 'life' (Deleuze 2005:165). Ronald Bogue re-iterates that for the Deleuzian modern cinematic character: '(t)he world is a bad movie, an endless series of banalities and clichés, platitudes and vacuous opinions' (Bogue in Rodowick 2009: 122). Deleuze writes of man's sudden awareness of clichés that begins to affect the possibility of belief in the world as a symptom of crisis; the cliché, as mentioned previously, is an image that is simplified and purely functional. When the perfunctory nature of the cliché, as one of the ways we invest meaning in the world, is made apparent, something ridiculous or even 'intolerable' (Deleuze 2005: 17) surfaces and man's automatic interaction with the world through daily routine falters. This revelation about routine and the cliché amounts to a realisation that both things exist, to a certain extent, because of man's fear of a void of meaning; it is this exposure of meaninglessness at the heart of supposedly meaningful human activity that is perhaps the 'intolerable and unbearable' (Deleuze 2005: 17) thing that renders all subsequent human action ridiculous.

Jarmusch seems to play on a similar notion by replacing the traditional cinematic narrative in which every element is meaningful with a clichéd filmic world in which everything is meaningless and any attempt to 'read' significance into things is thwarted continually. The film's opening sequence seems to confront directly the film viewer's ingrained need to interpret meaningfully any given cinematic narrative and, by extension, the desire to understand the world according to



human need. However, in spite of setting up the viewer's expectations by suggesting the themes of destiny and fate, Jarmusch undermines this through certain formal choices and cinematic techniques. From the outset, the pink letter that will inform Don that he is a father is involved in a chain of events that seem to suggest destiny or fate. By concealing the identity of the person who sent the letter (we only see his/her gloved hand), Jarmusch establishes from the outset a mystery that begs to be solved according to classical cinematic tradition – a trope often associated with melodrama. The path of the letter is traced through its transportation to the postal sorting office where it is moved through a series of mechanical belts and levers. Eventually, the audience infers that the letter has been sent by airmail as the scene cuts to an aeroplane taking off into a grey sky. Although this opening sequence is precisely edited to ensure prompt movement and suggests a certain reading, it is subtly undermined by Jarmusch's violation of screen direction, his focus on an open sky over which the film's title appears and his choice of music. Objects that enter or exit from screen left or right are seen to efface their own movement by re-entering the frame from the same position but in the opposite direction, which suggests erasure of movement rather than the development of a smooth trajectory and narrative progression; this 'movement' actually leads to nowhere. Jarmusch's use of a clouded sky to introduce the film's title – something that occurs after a momentary black out – connotes openness and opacity. The song that is heard over this opening section of the film foretells both the lack of resolution to the film's mystery and the inability to pin the world down to any contrived meaning. At the moment the film's title appears, Holly Golightly sings the words: 'I tried to see through the skies, but the clouds were there blocking out the sun' as though to hint that Don's quest or trip will be an 'absurd' one that does not lead to any clear meaning. Jarmusch suggests that, however much the audience may try to read meaning and order into the diegetic world, it will always remain frustratingly opaque and unfathomable. This inclusion of a shot of open sky stands as a moment of pure void, which reminds one of Deleuze's delineation of the difference between clichés and purely optical images. Here, this image breaks with the previous sequence that had suggested pre-ordained meaning and enchained activity and ushers in a moment of pure contemplation that points towards the opacity at the heart of the film's narrative.

# BROKEN FLOWERS

Figure 2: Titles from *Broken Flowers*.

As we have seen, Deleuze states that the 'subtle' way out of the intolerable situation of the world of clichés is to believe, in spite of all its absurd aspects, in *this* world and not some higher, ideal world. Rodowick (2009: 99) writes of the conclusion that Deleuze draws: 'the fundamental ethical choice is to believe in this world and its powers of transformation.' This is to say that we must move beyond our state of familiar banality towards the unfathomable contained in the everyday in order to recognise once more the very possibilities that life can offer us. Ultimately for Deleuze, cinema must show belief in the modern world with all of its potential for renewal and discovery (2005: 166). The rite of passage at stake in *Broken Flowers* is Don's transformation into an 'active' man; in Deleuzian terms nihilism and the value of nil must be negated through the eternal return (as the return of difference), for only difference and becoming can be affirmed in this process. As we will see, the very structure of *Broken Flowers* is cyclical, but what returns in this process is not a form of confirmation of the same, but the possibility of a new mode of existence. It also requires a re-affirmation of life's absurdity; it would seem at the beginning of the film that the world's indifference to human need (which Deleuze states is a symptom of the cinema of time) has given Don justification to become indifferent to himself, others and the world. In opposition to this, Deleuze, taking his cue from Nietzsche, states: '(t)hat the universe has no purpose, that it has no end to hope for any more than it has causes to be known – this is the certainty necessary to play well.' (2006: 25) Here, Deleuze is referring to the act of rolling a



dice as a metaphor for the affirmation of chance, possibility and becoming (an act that he opposes to the wager which is merely deciding between two existing options) and it is this affirmation of chance and life's possibilities that is lacking in the figure of Don.<sup>49</sup> In Nietzschean terms, Don is a man of *ressentiment* because he becomes willingly a victim through his passivity: everything happens *to* him, yet he refuses to act to change anything about his situation (later on in the film, he will remind one of his ex-girlfriends Penny that it was *she* who left *him*). Deleuze writes of the man of *ressentiment*: '(t)he term "passive" stands for the triumph of reaction, the moment when, ceasing to be acted, it becomes *ressentiment*. The man of *ressentiment* does not know how to and does not want to love, but wants to be loved.' (2006: 110) Don does not seem to understand why his romances fail continually, yet it is clear to the viewer that his passivity and indifference close him off from the possibility of connecting with another human being in any meaningful way. In the scene in which Sherry leaves him, the camera is positioned in line with Don; Don is framed in profile and Sherry (played by Julie Delpy) appears as a non-descript outline in the top left section of the frame. Jarmusch eschews the use of rack focus so that she appears as an adumbration of a female figure, a strategy that implies she is replaceable and that she does not impinge on Don's consciousness at this point. Don does not seem to be aware that she is leaving him until it is too late and Sherry is walking out to her car (this is the moment that he chooses to try to get her attention, perhaps knowing that it will have no effect by this point).

If the cinematic cliché of the 'break-up' scene is played out as a non-event in *Broken Flowers*, what follows is a series of scenes in which the idea of 'making nothing happen' is taken to an extreme. As stated earlier, crisis is evidenced initially in the film in a manner that is reminiscent of Deleuze's description of the breakdown of the action-image. Notably though, these 'symptoms' do not give way to any positive development in this initial section of the film, such as an affirmative 'thought of the outside' (2005: 164) that strengthens the link to *this* world. After Sherry has left Don, he sits on his own in the living room, drinks champagne and listens to Marvin Gaye singing the song 'I want you'. Undoubtedly, this scene is staged for comic effect: the romantic routine is overblown and embarrassing and Don has nobody to court anyway. This is obviously a hackneyed scenario that merely serves to emphasise the fact that Don is alone

---

<sup>49</sup> 'If we mention Pascal's wager it is merely to conclude finally that it has nothing in common with the dicethrow. In the wager it is *not* at all a matter of affirming chance, the whole of chance, but, *on the contrary*, of fragmenting it into probabilities, of minting it into "chances of gain and loss"'. (Deleuze 2006: 34).



again, but it is as a study of stillness that the scene has its most excruciating effect on the viewer. The scene opens with a lengthy close-up on a vase of wilting pink roses, the petals of which are dropping off; there is then a cut to a mid-shot of Don sitting on the sofa with a full glass of Moët et Chandon Champagne in front of him; a further cut into a close-up of the champagne in the glass reveals the effervescent bubbles in the drink. Notably, during the held mid-shot of Don sitting on the sofa, he makes a hesitant gesture as though he might pick up the champagne glass, but then decides against it. Due to the fact that this scene is altogether still, this tiny gesture is thrown into relief. Don is someone for whom the smallest or most insignificant initiative is too much. As a figure on screen, he is characterized in the negative: by what he *does not do*.

Throughout the duration of this scene the Marvin Gaye song serves as diegetic music, the lyrics of which seem to chastise Don directly: 'Don't play with something, you should cherish for life. Don't you want to care? Ain't it lonely out there?' The viewer may well read some meaning into the message of this song and its significance for Don, but it seems to have no impact on him directly (indeed, it seems rather bizarre that he has chosen to listen to it); Don remains a thoroughly inscrutable character to the viewer. This relentless focus on objects (that seem to possess more life than the main character here) renders this scene of seduction ridiculous and lends it a meaning quite apart from its status as a cliché or a hackneyed scenario. Clearly, the song, the flowers and the drink are all part of a ritual that has worn thin. The emphasis on inactivity, the focus on objects that force the spectator to look for longer than he/she normally would and the characterisation of Don as someone who merely stares and seems to be unresponsive or unable to react to his environment links this scene with Deleuze's description of the breakdown of the action-image. In Deleuzian terms, the long static shots of these objects strip them of their clichéd status and recuperate them as objects that take on a life of their own – the flowers register the passing of time because they are seen to be wilting and the movement of the bubbles in the champagne glass undercuts the stillness of this scene. It is as though Don's world carries on despite his inactivity and his reluctance to change his situation. He may be 'one more thing amongst things' (Suarez: 2007, 145), but his environment, divested of its usual meaning as seductive setting, seems marginally more alive than he does.



**Figure 3: Dead flowers (the original title of the film).**

Don's passivity is evident in his extreme reluctance to embark on the road trip; indeed, he is a thoroughly resistant neophyte in his own rite of passage. It is Winston who enables the trip by planning Don's journey, renting him a car and finding out the addresses of all his former lovers. Don is perhaps right to assume that the trip will prove to be a 'farce' and that he will find out nothing; however, the issue at stake, as we know, is not finding a solution to the mystery at the heart of the film's narrative but rather to insert movement and difference into Don's life (something that will never happen to him while sitting on his sofa in Circle Drive, Center City). Throughout the earlier part of the film, Jarmusch inserts several graphic matches between various scenes of Don sitting or sleeping on his sofa. The implication of these graphic matches is clearly that Don never leaves his home and never does anything different; he wakes up in exactly the same position that he falls asleep in and spends all day long there too. Winston urges Don to see the letter as a sign of the direction in which his life is heading. The main section of the film, in which Don re-visits five of his ex-girlfriends, has a cyclical structure. As we will see, Jarmusch deliberately emphasises the repetitive nature of Don's road trip by using a limited repertoire of shots; in addition, the landscape that Don drives through is not particularly varied even though we can surmise that he has crossed quite some distance because he has to take internal air flights to reach the different destinations. The recurrent musical motifs in Mulatu Astatke's music, which accompanies most of the road trip, also serves to heighten the effect or recurrence. While this structure clearly serves as form of parody or commentary on the repetitive and dull nature of



Don's existence up until this point (and in terms of any rite of passage could be read as various trials that the neophyte has to navigate to complete the passage successfully), it also, as a form akin to Deleuze's reading of the Nietzschean *eternal return*, breaks the cycle of repetition and inserts movement, chance and possibility into Don's life. He may not be able to change the effect his actions have had on others and himself in the past, but he can accept the possibility of the new and the affirmative in the present. As we will see, by the film's conclusion Don has undergone a subtle but important shift in his outlook on life and Jarmusch offers the viewer significant visual clues that are suggestive of this change.

### *The Eternal Return and The Affirmative Life.*

In the main part of the film, there is a visual symmetry between the scenes in which Don travels to his former lovers' houses. This is especially unusual for a road movie because it is a genre that emphasises the connection between geographical and personal progression. From the outset of the road trip, Jarmusch suggests that this 'quest' will not lead to anywhere. For three of the sections, Jarmusch uses a cluster of staple shots of an aeroplane taking off into a grey sky in which the aircraft is seen travelling from screen left to right; it is quite conceivable that this is the same shot used four times (including the shot of the aeroplane in the film's opening sequence) but carefully edited to look like four separate occasions. The aeroplane travels in the same direction each time, the sky is exactly the same hue in each and there are always two transmission poles on the right hand side of the screen. Once Don is inside his rental car, his journey is always conveyed through the same series of shots; these sequences, taken together consist of: seven profile shots of Don driving taken from the car's interior, ten frontal mid-shots of Don driving taken from the car's interior, eight close-ups of Winston's maps and CD or Don putting the CD into the radio system, seventeen stationary point of view shots of roads (either freeways or residential lanes) taken from the car's interior, seven panning shots from Don's point of view that start from the car's left-side wing mirror and move to face the road from inside of the car, six objective landscape shots of sections of freeway or houses (that are all pre-fabricated modern buildings), seven shots of the car either approaching or driving away from the stationary camera, five exterior travelling shots of Don in the car (usually on the freeway), and five over-the-shoulder shots of Don, whose eyes can be seen in the rear view mirror, looking at the map.



This effect of repetition and mirroring is accentuated by Jarmusch's use of the rhythmically-driven music of Ethiopian jazz musician Mulatu Astatke. Astatke's music is characterised by minor modes and recurring themes and variations played in a consistent rhythmic pattern. Jarmusch is deliberately selective with the musical score in order to emphasise its repetitive refrains. Although at least two separate pieces of Astatke's compositions are used, it is only after multiple viewings that it is possible to decipher the subtle differences between these sections of music. The instrumentation of jazz organ and tenor saxophone is a constant, and the key is always predominantly minor, but not morosely so. The pieces are composed of a distinct theme that is then repeated through the use of slight variation. Interestingly, there is a clash between the more buoyant, recurring chords of the organ and the expressive minor refrain of the saxophone that never leads to a melodic resolution. Jarmusch uses Astatke's music to compliment the themes of the film: repetition, the mysterious, inchoate nature of the world and the inevitable lack of resolution to what one is seeking. The lasting effect of these scenes of transition is one of indecipherability; taken as a group, there is little differentiation between them. The landscape remains resolutely urban throughout (either large, anonymous sections of motorway or equally non-descript sections of suburbia). Furthermore, these moments of transition or liminality are given nearly as much screen time as Don's reunions with his former lovers and, while the meetings are characterised by a certain amount of repetitious, ritualistic routine, these moments of transition reinforce the theme of punishment through re-iteration to cumulative effect. Indeed, Don's reunions with his former lovers are constructed out of similar shots that help to reflect the uncomfortable atmosphere Don's presence creates. In particular, Jarmusch uses the shot / countershot technique to suggest division between the characters as well as a mounting feud. Indeed, these scenes grow increasingly acrimonious and on his final encounter, Don is knocked unconscious. In terms of the rite of passage, these encounters clearly constitute some a set of trials for Don that should prepare him for the next stage in his life. In Deleuzian terms though, it is not the case that Don must pass to a new stage in his life but that he must undergo a transformation from a man of *ressentiment* and *passivity* to a more affirmative and active way of thinking, which in turn requires a new set of values: '(t)he reversal of values and the establishment of active values are all operations which presuppose the transmutation of values, the conversion of the negative into affirmation.'(2006: 166) According to Deleuze's interpretation of Nietzsche, the affirmative value is embodied in the 'overman'. Deleuze writes: 'affirmation is only manifested above man, outside man, in the Overman which it produces and in the unknown that it brings with it. But the superhuman, the unknown, is also the whole which drives out the negative.'(2006: 167) The Overman does not designate dominance, but superiority

to man because 'man', for Nietzsche, is habitually tied to reaction and the nihilistic impulse: 'Ressentiment, bad conscience and nihilism are not psychological traits but the foundation of humanity in man.' (Deleuze 2006: 60). In order to break with this negativity, man must undergo a transmutation and the negative must be transformed into the affirmative. In doing this, he becomes the Overman. It would be too bold a claim to state that Don Johnston becomes an example of the Overman by the conclusion of *Broken Flowers*, but he does undergo a subtle transformation through his 'cyclical' road trip that allows him to re-view the world's opacity and indifference to man's needs in an affirmative way.

If this Nietzschean / Deleuzian reading of *Broken Flowers* is accepted, it is possible to draw an analogy between the cyclical and repetitive structure of the film and Deleuze's reading of Nietzsche's concept of the *eternal return* as the return of difference: '(t)he eternal return is not the permanence of the same, the equilibrium state or the resting place of the identical. It is not the same or the 'one' which comes back in the eternal return but return is itself the one which ought to belong to diversity and to that which differs.' (2006: 43) In opposition to traditional readings of the eternal return, Deleuze states that what returns is not 'the same' but 'difference' and 'diversity' (2006: 43). He states that the to will the eternal return is to make two levels of selection: the first selection being the necessity of willing every action again and the second being the negation of negativity itself. The initial level of willing is highly selective already: the affirmative man shall will life-enhancing properties that enable becoming; yet it is in the second form of willing that the negative is eradicated for the eternal return of the negative is illogical.<sup>50</sup> Deleuze writes: '(o)nly the eternal return can complete nihilism *because it makes negation a negation of reactive forces themselves*. By and in the eternal return nihilism no longer expresses itself as conservation and victory of the weak but as their destruction, their *self-destruction*.' (2006: 65) In other words, negation in the eternal return becomes an active force and eradicates negative or reactive forces in the process. Nihilism as a life-value can never be affirmed through the eternal return because it self-destructs within this process: '(h)owever far they go, however deep the becoming-reactive of forces, reactive forces will not return. In and through the eternal return negation as a quality of the will to power transmutes itself into affirmation of negation itself, it becomes a power of affirming, an affirmative power.' (2006: 66) Furthermore, for Nietzsche, the transmutation of the negative into the affirmative way of life is also a confirmation of the *creation*

---

<sup>50</sup> 'The eternal return of the mean, small, reactive man not only makes the thought of the eternal return unbearable, it also makes the eternal return itself impossible; it puts contradiction into the eternal return...for how could the eternal return, the being of becoming, be affirmed of a becoming nihilistic?' (Deleuze 2006: 60)

of values; this, of course, does not mean the creation of a higher set of values from which we judge and depreciate life, but the creation of values that honour life in spite of its absurdity; it urges us to create values that are enhancing to life: '(t)o affirm is to create [values], not to bear, put up with or accept.' (Deleuze 2006: 175) Through the affirmative life, a greater sense of urgency is placed on the passing of time as indivisible *durée*. To affirm is also to recognise becoming and to open oneself up to the possibilities offered by creativity and the thought of the outside. For Don, it is a question of acknowledging the potential of difference and the genuinely new. His statement to the young man, who has proved to be the most promising candidate for his 'son', that 'the past is gone and the future is not here yet, so this is all we have' seems to reflect the importance of the passing of the 'present' moment. Deleuze, following on from Nietzsche states that: '(t)o affirm is not to take responsibility for, to take on the burden of what is, but to release, to set free what lives...to create new values which are those of life, which make life light and active.' (2006: 174) Don cannot really atone for his former actions; his travels through the 'sheets' of his 'past'(to use Deleuzian terminology) have merely revealed to him that he has made the same mistakes continually; by acknowledging that the past is unchangeable and that the 'future' is really conceptual, he opens himself up to the possibility of *difference* within the passing present: '(t)hat the present moment is not a moment of being or of present "in the strict sense", that it is the passing moment, *forces* us to think of becoming, but to think of it precisely as what could not have started, and cannot finish, becoming.'(2006: 44) There are certain visual clues that Jarmusch gives to the film viewer to suggest Don's subtle, but affirmative transformation.

The formal manner in which Jarmusch presents this last section of the film suggests that Don's awareness of the absurdity and opacity of life has led him to re-affirm its possibilities and his own potential. This reading proposes that Don chooses to believe in *this* world and its possibility, then. Ronald Bogue (in Rodowick 2009: 121), developing Deleuze's discussion of the necessity to believe in this world, states that: '(t)hose who choose to choose affirm the possible'. Fundamentally, the issue at stake here is the choice between two modes of life: that of the man who refuses to believe in anything and therefore chooses nihilism and that of the man who chooses to affirm life and thus creates values that honour life lived in the becoming of the present moment. Through his rite of passage / road trip, Don has re-encountered his past in all its depressing banality and repetitiveness;<sup>51</sup> he has had life's essential meaninglessness re-

---

<sup>51</sup> Interestingly, the most promising clue Don sees on his road trip proves to be inconsequential. While visiting Penny, he spies a broken pink typewriter that has been discarded in the overgrown grass; Jarmusch focuses on this object for a substantial amount of time in close-up, which renders it mysterious. Yet moments later, Don is knocked unconscious and a



confirmed to him, but, just as he seems to be reneging on his altered outlook, he has an encounter that encourages him to believe in life's opacity as a form of chance. This encounter, if this reading of the Nietzschean reading of the film is taken as valid, gives Don a chance to think differently about his life. Deleuze writes of the change in consciousness: '(t)he phrase "a new way of thinking" means an affirmative thought, a thought which affirms life and the will to life, a thought which finally expels the whole of the negative; to believe in the innocence of the past and the future, to believe in the eternal return.' (Deleuze 2006: 33) At this point in the film, Don has just returned from his road trip and berates Winston for sending him out on a 'farcical' errand; Don claims he simply wants to go back to leading his life, yet it is at this very moment that he sees the young man who proves to be the most promising contender as his hypothetical son. Don buys the boy a sandwich and strikes up a conversation with him; he finds out that the boy likes 'philosophy and girls' and Don tellingly replies to him that he *was* into 'computers and girls'. Despite the fact that Don has just proclaimed that he wants to go back to leading his old way of life to Winston, he then describes his life in the past tense to this young man. Furthermore, this seems to be the most intimate and open encounter Don has had with any individual in some time. In view of this, the last shot in the film seems significant.

Throughout the film, Jarmusch has used a repertoire of shots to connote sameness and mundanity. The opening shot of one scene will often mirror the closing shot of the previous scene (for example the shots Don sleeping on his sofa) and the effect of this is an annihilation of time's passing. In effect, Don's repetitive existence seems set up to deny the fact of time's passing; one day is exactly the same as the next. Similarly, the main body of the film is constructed out of shots of echo and refrain, which all denote self-sameness, repetition and, above all, stasis. Even though *Broken Flowers* can be broadly characterised as a road movie, there is very little movement within the diegesis. This is because Don is such an intransigent character, so resistant to change, that he is passively transported along: we may see landscape passing outside his car window, but within the car the atmosphere is stifling and claustrophobic. Indeed, Don's facial features even very rarely move. In addition, Jarmusch's camera often remains static: it either captures movement from inside the car or remains stationary outside of the vehicle and shows it entering or exiting the frame. The final shot of the film, however, stands in notable and stark contrast to its main body. As Don stands at a set of crossroads, Jarmusch's camera pans

---

black screen fills the frame. In Deleuzian terms, the most pure 'opsign' replaces the very object the protagonist, and by extension the viewer, seeks to read meaning into.

around him in a circular shot; of course the ‘crossroads’ are a traditional visual motif for indicating a point of crisis in someone’s life and this is precisely what Don faces at the end of the film. Moreover, the ‘ring’ is an established symbol in folklore for marriage, fidelity and commitment; arguably, Don may also be considering the possibility of marrying Sherry here.<sup>52</sup> For Deleuze, the only solution to the crisis of the modern protagonist who ‘no longer believes in love and life’ is a stubborn insistence on belief in *this world* and all of its potential all the same; similarly, Don has had the absurdity of the world confirmed to him (something that typifies his outlook on the world from the film’s outset), but it would seem his consciousness or realisation of this has shifted by the film’s conclusion. If *this* is all we have, as he points out at the end of the film, one has to make the most of it by honouring life’s unpredictability, by accepting chance, by affirming life. The crisis that Don faces at the end of the film is altogether different from that which he faces at the film’s opening. He is between multiple paths: *he has to become the man who chooses to choose*. In Deleuzian terms, the only affirmative choice is to live *this* life.

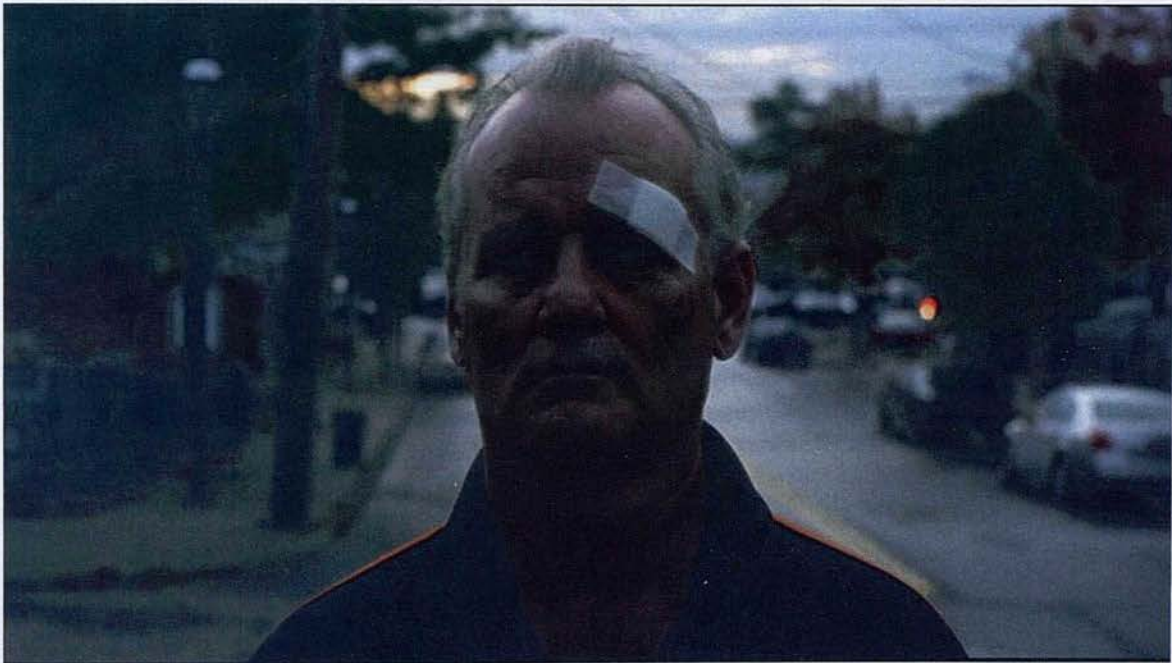


Figure 4: At the crossroads.

<sup>52</sup> It seems more than likely at this point in the film that it was Sherry who sent Don the anonymous letter. He receives a similar note from her on pink paper and in red type face. In this letter, she informs Don that she ‘still likes him’.



## Conclusion.

As I stated in the introduction to this thesis, the dominant approach to American Independent Cinema in critical and scholarly studies is to categorize it in terms of economic, production and distribution strategies.<sup>53</sup> This focus on the meaning and context of the very term 'Independent' has resulted in a paucity of material on the aesthetics and poetics of this kind of cinema and its specific effect (or to use the Deleuzian term *affect*) on the cinematic spectator. The purpose of this study was to examine a corpus of six American Independent films, which could readily fit into the scope of 'Indiewood' cinema, but from a particularly formal perspective. By focusing on the themes of crisis, liminality, transition, mutation and transformation, I have tried to emphasise the ways in which American Independent cinema appropriates and transfigures the tropes of European 'Art' cinema for its own highly specific purposes. To return to Bordwell's assessment, American Independent Cinema does not merely 'copy' the central tenets of art cinema but transforms them in a highly 'complex' manner (2008). The synthesis of anthropological and Deleuzian material, used as a theoretical framework, has allowed me to examine and characterise this corpus of films in a number of useful ways as: *a cinema of crisis and transition; as a cinema of liminality and ambiguity; a cinema that works on genre subversively; an existential cinema; a cinema of time and thought that breaks apart received ways of thinking and encourages creativity; and a cinema that travels between the movement and the time image regimes*. Although there is incongruity between the social anthropological and Deleuzian approaches to film (which calls for address outside of this study), this alliance of materials has allowed me to delineate some of the ways in which American Independent Cinema 'transforms' art cinema for its own purposes. More specifically, I have tried to characterise American Independent film as one focused on situations and images of crisis; often this relates to narratology (for instance, *how* does one relate a situation of crisis or initiate the process of understanding it as in Van Sant's *Elephant*), but as we have seen this is most interestingly made manifest on a formal level. That is, we are no longer dealing with a 'situation' of crisis (which is commonly the case in any classical film), but a crisis-image: an image of

---

<sup>53</sup> In his recent studies (2009 and 2010), John Berra claims that the field of independent cinema remains 'largely untouched theoretically' (2009: 13); although Berra uses the work of Pierre Bordieu on the class system and culture (as does King 2008 and 2010) as a framework for assessing American independent film, his research nonetheless focuses on the history of the independent film industry and its financial collaboration with major companies; Berra (2009: 13), along with scholars such as Merritt, defines independence somewhat negatively: '(t)he stranglehold which the Hollywood studios have over the film business has contributed to the 'commercialization' of American 'independent' cinema, the gradual erosion of its values, the restraint of its cultural impulse, and the labelling of a 'movement' that has become an invaluable aspect of Hollywood's industry of mass production.'



instability, transition and metamorphosis. By privileging uniquely cinematic elements, the ontological status of the moving image is thrown into crisis; bodies on screen are already inherently in a situation of flux and becoming because this is the very essence of the cinematic. Indeed, as we know, a whole formal and stylistic system of continuity is in place to contain the 'excessive' nature of the filmic image; its unpredictability must be harnessed in order to create a cognitively comprehensible world from the abundance of stimuli it presents to the viewer. To varying extents, these films play with the unstable and disruptive elements of the cinematic in order to produce situations of *becoming*. In other words, what these films help to foreground is the fact that film is the artistic medium *of crisis* par excellence.

We can now ascertain what the crisis-image is in its multiple facets and also broach the applicability of this theory more generally to American Independent Cinema and some of the issues this would raise for further study. Succinctly put, the crisis-image is one that deals with surfaces in order to convey what is ordinarily hidden or kept from the viewer; the crisis-image engages with genre to open out its boundaries and to signal new ways of seeing and thinking; the crisis-image de-familiarises the quotidian or mundane in order to reveal, in some cases, its systematic brutality or its suffocating limitation and in other cases, to bring us back to *this* world rather than to transport us to a transcendent or ideal one; the crisis-image presents the cinematic viewer with images of transformation and metamorphosis: a perpetual becoming-other; the crisis-image reveals *lines of flight* within stasis and repetition. Above all, the crisis-image is one that solicits from the film viewer creative rather than habitual patterns of thought.

The crisis-image is one that conveys both stasis and liberation. Often it is the case that the protagonist is defined by a pre-fabricated 'role' or identity, which is imposed from without. The protagonist him/herself is a 'type' or 'representative' being. Moreover, the world the protagonist inhabits is one held together by stereotypical association and is populated by specific role models. In the case of a film like *Broken Flowers*, this world is almost uncannily familiar because the director plays on so many clichés and stereotypical images. In both *Lost in Translation* and *Broken Flowers*, the protagonist is looking, in Deleuzian terms, for a *line of flight* out of this situation. This impetus to escape pervades the very bodies of these films through movement, colour, light and texture, something which we see most prominently in *Lost In Translation*. By way of further example, the final circular panning

shot of *Broken Flowers* is vitally important not only because of its ‘difference’, which offsets the stasis of what has preceded it, but also because it signals a change in consciousness: a liberation of selfhood and choice. In other words, what these films show us are ways to escape the stultifying and deadening effects of the cliché; they give us reasons to believe in *this* world again rather than a transcendent one.

Most importantly, the cinema of crisis is one that shows this ‘crisis’ as ‘transformation’; the latter term refers not only to corporeal and spiritual metamorphosis in the cinematic characters and world, but also to the manner in which the viewer is compelled to *think* about the images on screen. This is to say, a cinema of crisis, as characterised in this thesis, is one that, above all, challenges and renews the possibilities of thinking about and engaging with cinema and, by extension, our world. Deleuze, writing in 1983, said of American film: ‘the American cinema [has found] its limits. All the aesthetic or even political qualities that it can have remain narrowly critical and in this way even less ‘dangerous’ than if they were being made use of in a project of positive creation. Then, either the critique swerves abruptly and attacks only a misuse of apparatuses and institutions, in striving to save the remains of the American Dream, as in Lumet; or it extends itself, but becomes empty and starts to grate, as in Altman, content to parody the cliché instead of giving birth to a new image.’ (2005a: 215)<sup>54</sup> I have demonstrated that the films discussed in this thesis are not merely ‘content to parody the cliché’ because they challenge the film viewer to think and see anew in a variety of ways.

---

<sup>54</sup> As we have seen, Deleuze’s sentiment has been echoed in the criticism of contemporary film critics and scholars who tend to judge the merits of film historically. Indeed, Hannah McGill (2007), in her article entitled ‘No Budget Days’ on Andrew Bujalski’s *Funny Ha Ha* (2006) and more generally on the state of American independent cinema remarks that the film has only received critical praise because of what she regards as its resemblance in tone and mood to the work of John Cassavetes and, even more erroneously, French filmmaker Eric Rohmer. I would argue that Bujalski’s film actually has very little in common with the work of the two latter directors, with the possible exception of its pace and a close viewing/reading would support this. In comparing contemporary American cinema retrospectively, critics, such as McGill, do it a great disservice because they not only imply that current filmmakers are incapable of producing anything new, but also that American cinema deals exclusively in clichés. This is to say that these critics suggest that American cinema is made up of images that we *already recognise and know how to think about*. I would argue that this suggests both short-sightedness and an extreme lack of imagination on the part of these critics who are unable to understand a film outside of the critical framework they have already constructed. Bujalski’s film and the criticism it received, however positive, is a case in point.

Another aspect of the cinema of crisis is its deliberate engagement with its cinematic inheritance. The films discussed in this thesis all engage with genre and intertextuality on some level. This is to say that they are part of a cinematic tradition. However, this engagement with what is 'recognisable' or easily 'readable' for the cinematic audience is undermined by the directors' subversive use of genre. Either our attention is drawn towards the very 'surface' of the image, or we find ourselves wondering about what the image conceals from us. In other words, the adoption of generic form (which is somewhat inevitable) is only useful to these directors when it allows them to suggest another reality, something that can only be reached through new and affirmative processes of thought rather than received ways of thinking. In initially using imagery that is readily comprehensible because it is culturally codified, these directors are really harnessing it as a way to *show* what is not usually seen and to help the viewer to *think* what is not ordinarily thought. Sofia Coppola's *The Virgin Suicides* is a case in point: something sinister and foreboding exists beneath the surface of the beautiful images that fill the screen. These images, through their abundance, become disturbing rather than lulling or pacifying for the viewer. Pam Cook (2006: 36) notes astutely: '*The Virgin Suicides* is not nostalgic. Beneath its glowing, dreamy images is something dark and desperate that lies secreted in suburban American life, evading rational explanation.' As we have seen, by adopting the aesthetic of soft pornography and advertising campaigns, Coppola not only suggests that the limitations placed on adolescent selfhood by a society that functions through pre-formed definitions of identity are thoroughly dangerous, she also hints at a collective inability to deal with the reality of the adolescent experience, a complete denial of its inherent brutality. In *Elephant*, the viewer is thrown into a world that is already in crisis; the labyrinthine corridors of a high school are places within which the protagonists are isolated and vulnerable beings on the verge of disintegration. The violence that breaks through into the image at the end of the film merely helps to render obvious that which was already there within the school's systematic and controlling infrastructure. Murray Pomerance (in Siebel and Shary 2007: 215) states: '(t)hat high school [in *Elephant*] is the epitome of a capitalist social structure that has forgone sensation and pleasure, poetry, affect, philosophy, and experience for commodification, regulation, packaging, manipulation, indoctrination and profit. The corridors through which Nathan [one of the students] softly parades are ideal for target practice; the persons we see and move past here are nothing but figures against the ground. If they become targets, gruesomely, this school was already designed for such transformation.' In other words, Van Sant



consistently directs the viewer's attention towards the surface of the image because everything is already there to be seen, but it requires an adjustment in vision and thought. This world is made strange to the viewer in order to make him/her think anew, to recognise the altered 'everyday' contained within these images as his/her own world and, above all, to reclaim both the banal and the violent as parts of the tapestry that makes up *our* world.

In this thesis, I have attempted to apply this theory to a corpus of six films which I believe are representative of the 'Indiewood' tradition; this raises the question of whether or not this theory provides a pertinent framework to examine American Independent film more generally. The work of Noah Baumbach (*The Squid and The Whale* (2005), *Margot at the Wedding* (2007) and *Greenberg* (2010)) and Kelly Reichardt (*Old Joy* (2006), *Wendy and Lucy* (2008), *Meek's Cutoff* (2010) seems apposite in terms of the themes of crisis, transition and, in particular, liminality. Furthermore, and as we have seen, the synthesis of anthropological texts and Deleuze's cinematic theory used in this thesis is a fruitful and readily applicable approach to film more generally. Indeed as I have argued, as the medium of being as change, film is an inherently suitable format to explore themes of transition, metamorphosis, disintegration and re-birth, all of which are central to the rites of passage narrative. In fact, the number of films that centre on rites of passage (such as the 'teen' picture which has a very strong tradition in American cinema) provide strong evidence that cinema is the ideal art form for representing crisis and change. If one were to develop this framework as a more generally applied theory to American Independent cinema, two crucial issues would have to be addressed: the extent to which crisis and the state of liminality can be linked specifically to the state of crisis in America and, following on from this, the extent to which this cinema can be characterised as a political cinema as well as a cinema of thought. I intend to make these latter research questions the basis for further study of American Independent cinema as one of crisis and thought.

### Bibliography.

- Adorno, Theodor W. (ed. Bernstein, J.M). 2009. *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture* (London: Routledge).
- Atkinson, Mike. 2007. 'That's Entertainment', *Sight and Sound*, April, pp.18-23
- Barthes, Roland. (Trans. Howard, Richard). 1982. *The Empire of Signs* (New York: Hill and Wang)
- — (Trans. Howard, Richard).1993. *Camera Lucida. Reflections on Photography* (London: Vintage)
- — (Trans. Miller, Richard). 2000. *Mythologies* (London: Vintage Classics)
- Bazin, Andre. (Trans. Grey, Hugh).1967, 1971. *What is Cinema?* (Berkeley: University of California Press)
- Bell, Catherine. 1997. *Ritual* (Oxford: Oxford University Press)
- Bergson, Henri. (Trans. Paul, Nancy Margaret and W. Scott Palmer). 2004. *Matter and Memory* (London: Dover)
- Bernstein, B., H.L Elvin and R.S Peters.1966. 'Ritual in Education', *Philosophical Transaction of the Royal Society of London. Series B, Biological Sciences*, December, pp.429-436
- Berra John. 2009. *Declarations of Independence: The Partiality of Independent Production* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press)
- — (ed). 2010. *American Independent Film: Directory of World Cinema* (Bristol: Intellect Publishing)
- Bettelheim, Bruno. 1971. *Symbolic Wounds: Puberty Rites and the Envious Male* (New York: Collier Books)
- Beugnet, Martine. 2004. *Claire Denis* (Manchester: Manchester University Press)
- —2007. *Cinema and Sensation: French Film and the Art of Transgression* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press)
- Biskind, Peter. 2005. *Down and Dirty Pictures* (London: Bloomsbury Press)
- Blake, William. 2004. *The Complete Poems* (London: Penguin Classics)
- Bogue, Ronald. 2003. *Deleuze and Cinema* (London: Routledge)
- Bordwell, David. 2006. *How Hollywood Tells It* (Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press)



- Braidotti, Rosi. 2002. *Metamorphoses: Towards a Materialist Theory of Becoming* (Cambridge: Polity)
- Braudy, Leo and Marshall Cohen (eds). 1999. *Film Theory and Criticism. Introductory Readings* (Oxford: Oxford University Press)
- Brooks, Xan. 2004. 'Elephant', *Sight and Sound*, February, p.43
- Burch, Noel. 1981. *Theory of Film Practice* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press)
- Burns, Peter. 1999. *An Introduction to Tourism and Anthropology* (London: Routledge)
- Butler, Judith. 2006. *Gender Trouble* (London: Routledge)
- Camus, Albert. (Trans. O'Brien, Justin) 2000. *The Myth of Sisyphus* (London: Penguin Classics)
- Chang, Chris. 2005. 'Guided by Voices', *Film Comment*, July / August,  
<<http://filmlinc.org/fcm/7-8-2005/lastdays.htm>> [accessed 23 October, 2007]
- Cohen, E. 1988. 'Authenticity and Commoditization in Tourism', *Annals of Tourism Research*, vol.15, pp.371-86
- Cohan, Steven and Ina Rae Hark (eds). 1997. *The Road Movie Book* (London: Routledge)
- Colebrook, Claire. 2002. *Understanding Deleuze* (London: Routledge)
- Colman, Felicity. 2005. 'Hit Me Harder: The Transversality of Becoming-Adolescent', *Women: A Cultural Review*, 16.3, pp.356-371
- Cook, Pam (ed). 2009. *The Cinema Book* (London: BFI Publishing)
- (2006). 'Portrait of a Lady: Sofia Coppola', *Sight and Sound*, November, pp 36-40.
- Creed, Barbara. 1993. *The Monstrous Feminine Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge)
- Cruikshank, John. 1960. *Albert Camus and the Literature of Revolt* (Oxford: Oxford University Press)
- Dalton, Stephen. 2005. 'Last Days', *Sight and Sound*, September, pp. 65-6
- Day, Kiku. 2004. 'Totally Lost in Translation', *The Guardian*, Saturday, 24 January  
<<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2004/jan/24/japan.film/print>> [accessed 5 March, 2008]
- Deleuze, Gilles. (Trans. Tomlinson, Hugh and Robert Galeta). 2005a. *Cinema-1. The Movement-Image* (London: Continuum)
- 2005. *Cinema-2*. (Trans. Tomlinson, Hugh and Robert Galeta) *The Time-Image* (London: Continuum)
- Deleuze, Gilles and Felix Guattari. (Trans. Massumi, Brian). 1988. *A Thousand Plateaus* (London: The Athlone Press)
- Deleuze, Gilles. 1983. *Nietzsche and Philosophy* (New York: Columbia University Press)



- Derrida, Jacques. (Trans. Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty). 1974. *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press)
- Docherty, Thomas. 1996. *Alterities: Criticism, History, Representation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press)
- Due, Reidar. 2007. *Deleuze* (Cambridge: Polity)
- Durkheim, Emile. 1965. *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (New York: Free Press)
- Dyer, Richard. 1997. *White* (London: Routledge).
- Eggleston, William. 2002. *William Eggleston's Guide* (New York: MoMA)
- — 2009. *Democratic Camera: Photographs and Video (1958-2008)* (New York: Yale University Press in collaboration with MoMA)
- Eliade, Mircea. 1963. *Myth and Reality* (New York: Harper and Row)
- Elsaesser, Thomas. (ed) 2005. *The Last Great Picture Show: New Hollywood Cinema in the 1970s* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press)
- Ezra, Elizabeth (ed). 2000. *France in Focus. Film and National Identity* (Oxford: Berg Press)
- Feinstein, Howard. 2005. 'Death Trip', *The Guardian*, Friday, 6 May,  
<<http://www.guardian.co.uk/music/2005/may/06/cannes2005.cannesfilmfestival>> [accessed 15/10/2007]
- Foster, Hal. 1996. *The Return of the Real: Avant-Garde at the end of the Century* (Massachusetts: MIT Press)
- Flitterman-Lewis, Sandy. 1996. *To Desire Differently* (New York: Columbia University Press)
- Frazer, James. 1955. *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion* (London: Macmillan)
- French, Philip. 2005. *Westerns: Aspects of a Film Genre* (Manchester: Carcanet Press Ltd.)
- Freud, Sigmund. 1946. *Totem and Taboo* (New York: Vintage Books)
- —. 2003. *Beyond the Pleasure Principle: And Other Writings* (London: Penguin Modern Classics)
- Fuller, Graham. 2000. 'Death and The Maidens', *Sight and Sound*, April, pp.15-18
- Gluckman, Max. 1963. 'Gossip and Scandal', *Current Anthropology*, 4, pp.307-15
- Hammond, Michael and Linda Williams (eds). 2006. *Contemporary American Cinema* (United Kingdom: Open University Press)
- Hantke, Steffan (ed). 2010. *American Horror Film: The Genre at the Turn of the Millennium* (Mississippi: University of Mississippi Press)
- Haskins, Sam. 1962. *Five Girls* (London: Bodley Head Limited)

- Hays, Matthew. 2000. 'Dying Young', *www.montrealmirror.com* May 25<sup>th</sup>:  
 <<http://www.montrealmirror.com/ARCHIVES/2000/052500/film1.html>> [accessed 23 November 2005]
- Heidegger, Martin. (Trans. Gray, Glenn J.).1968. *What is Called Thinking?* (New York: Harper and Row)
- Hertzberg, Ludvig (ed). 2001. *Jim Jarmusch Interviews* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press)
- Hilger, Michael. 2002. *From Savage to Nobleman: Images of Native Americans in Film* (USA: Scarecrow Press)
- Hirsch, Marianne. 1997. *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative and Postmemory* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press)
- Holmlund, Christine and Justin Wyatt (eds). 2004. *Contemporary American Independent Film: From the Margins to the Mainstream* (London: Routledge)
- Holquist, M (ed). (Trans. Emerson, Caryl and M. Holquist). 1981. *Dialogic Imagination. Four Essays by M.M Bakhtin* (Austin: University of Texas Press)
- Hsiang-Chiu, Chen. 2008. 'Sofia Coppola's *Lost In Translation*: A Tourist Romance and its Representation of Tourist Spatial Experience'  
 <[http://www.cc.ncu.edu.tw/~csa/journal\\_park454.htm](http://www.cc.ncu.edu.tw/~csa/journal_park454.htm)> [accessed 12 March, 2008]
- Jarmusch, Jim. 1996. *Dead Man*, <<http://www.nytrash.com/deadman/deadjj.html>> [accessed 21 March 2007]
- Jones, Kent. 1996. 'Dead Man', *Cineaste*, Vol. 22, No. 2, pgs 45-6
- Joyard, Olivier and Jean-Marc Lalanne. 2003. 'Trompe le monde', *Cahiers du Cinéma*, June, No. 580, pp.28-29
- Karlyn, Kathleen. 2007. *Beyond Dead White Men –New Life for the Revisionist Western: Jim Jarmusch's Dead Man*. <<http://Gladstone.uoregon.edu/~rraphael/film/papers/beyond.pdf>> [accessed 21 December, 2007].
- Kennedy, Barbara M. 2001. *Deleuze and Cinema: The Aesthetics of Sensation* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press)
- Kilpatrick, Jacquelyn. 1999. *Celluloid Indians* (Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press)
- King, Geoff. 2005. *American Independent Cinema* (New York: I.B Tauris)
- — 2008. *Indiewood, USA: Where Hollywood Meets Independent Cinema* (New York: I.B Tauris)
- —. 2010. *Lost in Translation*. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press)
- Kitses, Jim and Gregg Rickman (eds). 1999. *The Western Reader* (New York: Limelight Editions)



- Kollin, Susan. 2000. 'Dead Man. Dead West', *Arizona Quarterly*, Autumn, Vol. 50, No. 3, pp. 125-154
- Kramer, P. 2005. *The New Hollywood: From Bonnie and Clyde to Star wars* (London: Wallflower)
- Laderman, David. 2002. *Driving Visions* (Texas: University of Texas Press)
- Levi-Strauss, Claude. (Trans. Jacobson, Claire). 1963. *Structural Anthropology* (New York and London: Basic Books)
- Lewis, Jon. 1992. *The Road to Romance and Ruin: Teen Films and Youth Culture* (London: Routledge)
- Lev, P. 2006. *The Fifties: Transforming the Screen, 1950-1959 (History of the American Cinema)* (California: University of California Press)
- Lalanne, Jean-Marc. 2000. 'Où est le sang des vierges?' *Cahiers du cinéma*, October, p. 97
- Long, Scott. 1990. 'Nightmare in the Mirror: Adolescence and the Death of Difference' *Social Text*, No. 24, pp. 156-166
- Lount, Mark and Owen D. W Hargie. 1997. 'The Priest as Counsellor: an Investigation of the Critical Incidents in the Pastoral Work of Catholic Priests', *Counselling Psychology Quarterly*, Vol. 10, No. 3, September, pp. 247-260
- Martin-Jones, David. 2007. *Deleuze and National Identity* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press)
- Matsui, Leilla. 2004. 'Sofia's Critics Lose it in Translation', *Dissident Voice*,  
<<http://www.dissidentvoice.org/Mar04/Matsui0315.htm>> [accessed 5 March, 2008]
- Mauss, Marcel. (Trans. Halls, W.D). 1990. *The Gift* (London: Routledge)
- May, Todd. 2005. *Gilles Deleuze: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press)
- MGill, Hannah. 2007. 'No Budget days', *The Guardian*, Friday, 18 May,  
<[www.guardian.co.uk/film/2007/May/18/1](http://www.guardian.co.uk/film/2007/May/18/1)> [accessed 11 April 2010]
- McKibbin, Tony. 2004. 'Too Cool for School', [www.sensesofcinema](http://www.sensesofcinema.com)  
<<http://www.sensesofcinema.com/contents/04/32/elephant.html>> [accessed 6 December 2005]
- Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. (Trans. Smith, Colin). 1962. *The Phenomenology of Perception* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul)
- Merritt, Gregg. 1999. *A History of American Independent Film* (USA: Thunder Mouth's Press)
- Metz, Christian. 1974. *Film Language* (Oxford: OUP)
- Miller, Henry. 1960. 'Conspectus for the Study of Socialisation in the Peer Group', *Journal of Educational*, April, Vol. 33, No. 8, pp. 320-331
- Mulvey, Laura. 2006. *Death 24 X a Second* (London: Reaktion)



- Murphy, Amy. 2006. 'Traces of the Flâneuse. From *Roman Holiday* to *Lost in Translation*', *Journal of Architectural Education*, pp. 33-42.
- Nagib, Lucia and Cecilia Mello (eds). 2009. *Realism in the Audiovisual Media* (UK: Palgrave)
- Newman, Michael Z. 2009. 'Indie Culture: In Pursuit of the Authentic Autonomous Alternative', *The Cinema Journal*, Spring, No.3, pp. 16-34
- Nieland, Justus. 2001. 'Graphic Violence: Native Americans and the Western Archive in *Dead Man*' *The New Centennial Review*, 1.2, pp.171-200
- Norton, David.L. 1970. 'The Rites of Passage from Dependence to Autonomy, *The School Review*, November, Vol. 79, No.1, pp.19-41
- Orr, John. 1998. *Contemporary Cinema* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press)
- Owens, Bill. 1973. *Suburbia* (New York: Quick Fox Press)
- Parr, Adrian (ed). 2005. *The Deleuze Dictionary* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press)
- Pisters, Patricia. 2003. *The Matrix of Visual Culture: Working with Deleuze in Film Theory* (Indiana: Stanford University Press)
- Powell, Anna. 1996. *Deleuze and Horror Film* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press)
- —. 2007. *Deleuze, Altered States and Cinema* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press)
- Powrie, Phil and Robynn Stilwell (eds). 2006. *Changing Tunes: The Use of Pre-Existing Music in Films* (London: Ashgate)
- Propp, Vladimir. (Trans. Scott, Laurence). 1958. *The Morphology of the Folktale* (Indiana: University of Indiana Research Center Press)
- Radcliffe-Brown, Alfred R. 1945. 'Religion and Society', *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland*, Vol. 75, pp. 33-43
- Rapold, Nicolas. 2009. 'Come With Us' *Sight and Sound*, February, pp.28-30
- Rapport, Nigel and Joanna Overing. 2000. *Social and Cultural Anthropology: The Key Concepts* (London: Routledge)
- Roddick, Nick. 2005. 'Taking Care of Is-ness', *Sight and Sound*, November, pp.14-18
- Rodowick, D.N. 2003. *Gilles Deleuze's Time Machine* (Durham: Duke University Press)
- — (ed) 2009. *After-images of Gilles Deleuze's Philosophy* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press)
- Rogers, Anna. 2007. 'Sofia Coppola'  
<<http://www.sensesofcinema.com/contents/directors/07/sofia-coppola.html>> [accessed 28 October 2008]
- Rosenbaum, Jonathan. 2000. *Dead Man* (London: BFI)



- Rosen, Paul (ed). 1986. *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology: A Film Theory Reader* (New York: University of Columbia Press)
- Ruberto, Laura E. and Kristi M. Wilson (eds). 2007. *Italian Neorealism and Global Cinema* (USA: Wayne State University Press)
- Said, SF. 2004. 'Shock Corridors', *Sight and Sound*, February, pp.16-18
- Sakimoto, Sachi. 2008. 'Constructing an Alternative Playground: Japan as Imagined Cultural Space in *Lost in Translation*'  
<[http://www.allacademic.com/meta/p\\_mla\\_apa\\_research\\_citation/1/7/2/1/3/p172136\\_index.html](http://www.allacademic.com/meta/p_mla_apa_research_citation/1/7/2/1/3/p172136_index.html)> [accessed 3 September, 2008]
- Schultes, Richard Evans and Albert Hoffman. 1992. *Plants of The Gods – Their Sacred, Healing and Hallucinogenic Powers* (Vermont: Healing Arts Press) <<http://www.peyote.org>> [accessed 21 July, 2008]
- Scott, Neera. 2005. 'Sublime Anarchy in Gus Van Sant's *Elephant*', [www.sensesofcinema.com](http://www.sensesofcinema.com)  
<<http://www.sensesofcinema.com/contents/05/36/elephant.html>> [accessed 6 December 2005]
- Seaton, A (ed). 1994. *Tourism: The State of the Art* (London: Wiley)
- Seibel, Alexandra and Timothy Shary (eds). 2007. *Youth Culture in Global Cinema* (Austin: University of Texas Press).
- Shary, Timothy. 2002. *Generation Multiplex: The Image of Youth in Contemporary American Cinema* (Austin: University of Texas Press)
- — 2005. *Teen Movies: American Youth on Screen* (London: Wallflower Press)
- Shaviro, Steven. 1993. *The Cinematic Body* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press)
- Shonle, Ruth. 1925. 'Peyote: The Giver of Visions', *American Anthropologist*, Vol. 27, No. 1, pp. 53-75
- Smith, Alison. 1998. *Agnes Varda* (Manchester: Manchester University Press)
- Smith, Murray. 1995. *Engaging Characters: Fiction, Emotion and the Cinema* (Oxford: Clarendon Press)
- Smith, Valene (ed). 1978. *Hosts and Guests: The Anthropology of Tourism* (Oxford: Blackwell)
- Sontag, Susan. 2004. *On Regarding the Pain of Others* (London: Penguin)
- — 1979. *On Photography* (London: Penguin)
- Taubin, Amy. 2005. 'Blurred Exit', *Sight and Sound*, September, pp.16-19
- Tasker, Yvonne (ed). 2010. *Fifty Contemporary Filmmakers* (London: Routledge)



- Turner, Frederick Jackson. 2008. *The Significance of the Frontier in American History* (London: Penguin Books)
- Turner, Victor. 1969. *The Ritual Process* (New York: Aldine de Gruyter)
- Tzioumakis, Yannis. 2006. *American Independent Cinema: An Introduction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press)
- Van Gennep, Arnold. (Caffee, Gabrielle and Monika Vizedon).1960. *The Rites of Passage* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press)
- Visser, Margaret. 1991. *The Rituals of Dinner* (London: Penguin)
- Walker, Janet (ed). 2001. *Westerns: Films Through History* (London: Routledge)
- Welch, John. S. 2003. 'Ritual in Western Medicine and Its Role in Placebo Healing', *Journal of Religion and Health*, Spring, Vol. 42, No.1, pp. 21-33
- Westerkamp, Hildegard. 2001. 'Soundwalking'  
<<http://cec.Concordia.ca/econtact/Soundwalk/Soundwalking.htm>> [accessed 12 February, 2008]
- Williams, Stephen. (ed) 2004. *Tourism: Critical Concepts in the Social Sciences* (London: Routledge)
- Wood, Jason. 2004. *100 American Independent Films* (London: BFI)
- Wuthnow, Robert, Kevin Christiano and John Kuzlowski. 1980. 'Religion and Bereavement: A Conceptual Framework', *Journal for Scientific Study of Religion*, Vol.19, No. 4. pp. 408-421

### Unaccredited Resources

- San Francisco Film Society. 2006. *Sofia Coppola: A Fizzy Debut*  
[http://history.sffs.org/great\\_moments/great\\_moments.php?id=19](http://history.sffs.org/great_moments/great_moments.php?id=19) Accessed 9/11/2009
- San Jose Museum of Art.1996. *The Suburban Seventies: Photographs by Bill Owens*  
<http://www.tfaoi.com/aa/1aa/1aa200.htm> Accessed 8/11/2009

### Filmography

- Dead Man*. Dir. Jim Jarmusch. Miramax. 1994.
- The Virgin Suicides*. Dir. Sofia Coppola. Pathè. 1999.



*Elephant*. Dir. Gus Van Sant. HBO. 2003.

*Last Days*. Dir Gus Van Sant. HBO. 2004.

*Lost In Translation*. Dir Sofia Coppola. Focus Features. 2004.

*Broken Flowers*. Dir. Jim Jarmusch. Focus Features. 2005.